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## **En Busca de un Futuro Mejor [In Search of a Better Future]: Understanding Charter School Selection by Immigrant Latina/o Families**

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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

*En Busca de un Futuro Mejor* [In Search of a Better Future]:

Understanding Charter School Selection by Immigrant Latina/o Families

by

Carlos Alberto Garcia

A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

Loyola Marymount University,

in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

2018

*En Busca de un Futuro Mejor* [In Search of a Better Future]:

Understanding Charter School Selection by Immigrant Latina/o Families

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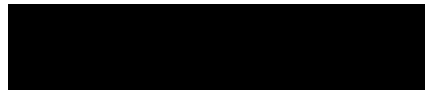
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This dissertation written by Carlos Alberto Garcia, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

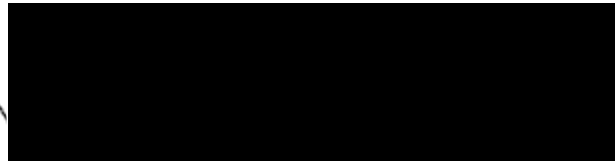
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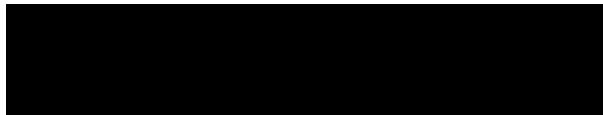
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A mis padres—Carlos y Alma gracias por su amor y apoyo incondicional. Les agradezco su apoyo, afecto, y cariño a través de mis logros, muchos años de estudio, las victorias y las derrotas de mi vida, los quiero mucho! Mayra Alexandra, although our lives are not always in sync, I am grateful to have you in my life and I am proud of the woman you have become! A mi Nana Esperanza, quien me ha guiado desde el más allá y me ha empujado en esos momentos donde no creía poder continuar, gracias; te extraño mucho! Dora Hueso, your light and your spirit are with me now and forever. Nino Javier and Nina Diana, you are my role models; thank you for your continued support, encouraging words, and love at every step in my life. A mi gran familia—Abuelos, tíos, tías, primos, primas, sobrinos, sobrinas, y ahijados—colorín colorado, este cuento se ha acabado! Gracias por comprender mi ausencia a lo largo de mis estudios!

The LMU School of Education beginning with my dissertation committee—Drs. Litton and dell'Olio I am grateful for your insight and for challenging me to think about this topic through new lenses. Dra. Baltodano mis respetos y agradecimientos por su apoyo y por empujarme a lograr esta meta. I appreciate your diligence, encouragement, and tough love! I thank you for allowing me to be vulnerable, for humanizing my experience, and for mentoring and guiding me through this process. The Social Cohort 12—I am honored to have gained an entire group of beloved colleagues and friends who I have learned immensely from and with. To all the faculty of the program who pushed my thinking and beliefs and challenged me to be a better leader, educator, and scholar, I am grateful to each of you.

My journey to the doctorate is one that began many years ago when I first encountered mentors who spoke my language, who shared cultural values, and who inspired me. The ones

who said in due time I too would earn a doctorate; that time has come and I am grateful for your encouragement, and for seeing my potential in ways I could not fathom. Thank you, Dr. John Hernandez, Dr. Corina Benavides Lopez, Dr. Rebecca Gutierrez-Keeton, Dr. Dora Lee for steering me in my educational and professional journey. To all my colleagues and friends from Cal Poly who led, guided, and pushed me through all of my schooling, thank you for believing in me! To Lita Patel, Rosie Pasos, and Sue Baird—20 years later, I continue being grateful to you for letting me be your student assistant and for your continued support and encouragement even if from a distance.

To my Odyssey colleagues, students, parents, and supporters, I thank you for the privilege to be a part of this unique and special community. I cannot imagine a more engaging, loving, and special place. I appreciate all I have learned from everyone during my years here, and look forward to the next chapter of the Odyssey journey. Lauren, Rachelle, and Katrina, thank you for your patience and for allowing me to pull away from work to take on a doctorate; I appreciate and value you more than I have said.

To my chosen familia—Mark Lopez, Carlos Hipolito-Delgado, Abigail Delgado, Toyia Younger, Angel Hernandez, Sal Mena, Patty Alvarez, Angel Wagner, Shaun Gittens, Wendell Hall, Ana Romero, and so many others—this milestone is a result of your guidance, example, and commitment to the betterment of our lives and communities. Since our time in College Park, I have loved and respected each of you! Gracias for being a part of my familia.

To the friends who have offered meals, drinks, laughs, a shoulder to cry on, and words of encouragement when I wanted to quit, thank you; I appreciate and love you deeply! Dr. Yadira Moreno, thank you for being my dissertation sister and for calling, texting, and pushing me to

work every day; especially on the days when life was too much to handle. We made it amiga! Denny Mejia & Norma Garcia you have been with me at every step of this journey and I could not have completed this without your love, support, and encouragement—thank you I love you both! Ruben Castorena, you stood by my side while I pursued this lifelong dream and I cannot thank you enough for your love, care, and support during this journey. Marta & Brad Rodriguez for being beacons of strength and reason during this journey! To the Cha-Chas: Corina, Rachelle, Helen, Liz, Monique, and Mari I am blessed to have you as lifelong friends and will always cherish our joint connection as educated Latina/os in pursuit of improving the lives of our comunidad. Se puede? SI!

Finally, to my lifelong friends who have known me for more years than I care to recall—Erik, Nazaria, Dora, Ted, Steve, and Jose I look forward to spending time with each of you as I will not have school as an excuse any longer.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to:

- A mis padres- Carlos y Alma, mis abuelos Antonio, Esperanza, Vicente y Rosa- por su valentía en dejar su tierra natal y emprender viaje a un mundo nuevo y desconocido todo por darnos un mejor futuro. Sus sacrificios no han sido en vano—me enorgullece llevar su sangre y apellidos,
- To the social justice educators and leaders whose calling is to create the conditions to improve the lives of the millions of children in our schools every day,
- A los padres y madres inmigrantes quien a diario arriesgan todo por ver a sus familias salir adelante y poderles dar una mejor vida, en especial aquellos que pagaron el precio del sueño americano con lo más preciado- sus vidas.



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## ABSTRACT

*En Busca de un Futuro Mejor* [In Search of a Better Future]:

Understanding Charter School Selection by Immigrant Latina/o Families

by

Carlos Alberto Garcia

This qualitative study focused on understanding the process immigrant Latina/o families in the greater Los Angeles area underwent when selecting a charter school for their children. Through narrative interviews, 13 participants shared their perspectives of how and why they chose a charter school, and detailed the factors they considered in their selection process. Through the theoretical framework of cultural community wealth, social and cultural capital, participants answered the research question why and how do immigrant Latina/o parents research and apply to charter schools, and what are the factors they consider in the decision-making process?

Participants described social networks as connections to charter schools their children attended. They indicated reasons for selecting a charter school included a desire for a better educational opportunity than what they had encountered in the traditional public school environment. They viewed education as a vehicle for upward social mobility and understood the value of a quality education in helping achieve this outcome. Participants described their

commitment to their children and families as a driving force behind their selection to actively search a better educational environment, which they found in charter schools.

The primary factors parents considered when selecting a charter school were the school's proximity and location, the attentiveness of teachers, the support of students' learning needs and challenges, a welcoming community, the school's leadership, staff who were able to communicate with parents in their native language as well as an active community of parents who demonstrated interest and involvement in the school.



## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The focus of this dissertation was on understanding how and why immigrant Latina/o families choose charter schools for their children. As a native of the greater Los Angeles area, I have experienced how school choice affects the lives of entire families; from those with the financial means to afford private school to those who thrive in traditional public schools. Throughout my educational trajectory, I have studied at parochial, private, and public schools in both urban and suburban environments. Within my own family, I bear witness to the vastly different educational opportunities afforded to me in contrast to my younger sister and extended family members. My primary education was at a neighborhood Catholic school and then a large comprehensive public high school; my sister and nearly all my extended family attended neighborhood public schools. Reflecting upon my educational journey, I realize school choice is complicated by myriad geographic, socioeconomic, political, and values-based elements that consciously and subconsciously influence decisions about schooling.

I am the eldest of two siblings; the child of immigrants with less than a high-school education, who left their native Mexico in search of employment opportunities that would lead to more productive lives so they could provide for themselves and their family. From a very young age, I received messages about the importance of school “*para tener un mejor futuro*” [in order to have a better future] from my mother. Despite their factory jobs, my parents made sacrifices to afford a Catholic school education for my primary education. The strong educational and socio-emotional foundation inculcated in a small, familial, and highly structured environment was seminal in my long-term success as a student. Due to financial hardships, my sister was unable to

attend private school and attended public schools from kindergarten through community college, where she is currently enrolled. The majority of my family members whose children were the first of our generation to attend schools in the United States also attended public schools; I am one of few who did not.

While school choice has historically privileged families with greater levels of economic, social, and cultural capital, the current educational landscape is dotted with no-cost school options including charter schools, magnet schools, and open-enrollment programs that provide families more educational options for their children. Despite the growing number of school options, Latina/o families do not always seek alternative learning environments other than what is found in their neighborhood school.

In my professional practice as a charter school administrator, I have encountered students and families who have endured less than ideal educational environments, resulting in disappointment and disillusionment with the educational system. I have heard stories of teachers who have denied parents access to their child's classroom, administrators who have continuously failed to provide adequate support services for students with learning challenges and disabilities, and school staff who condescendingly address parents who do not speak English. As a social justice educator and leader, these experiences are problematic, as I believe one role of schools is to serve as stimulating, supportive, and enriching environments for both students and families.

For the last 9 years, I have served as an administrator at an established, mid-sized, suburban, kindergarten through eighth-grade charter school in the greater Los Angeles area. Throughout my time at the institution, I have learned a lot about the complexities surrounding the functions, operations, legalities, and politics of public education—particularly charter

schooling. While the institution serves a racially and ethnically diverse population, I am acutely aware of the diversity of the Latina/o population, particularly the socioeconomic diversity of this segment of the campus population. The Latina/o community at my institution is comprised of factory workers, teachers, domestic employees, superior court judges, gardeners, university professors, construction workers, school principals, and stay-at-home mothers. While each of them has a unique story, they are all part of our community and have influenced the topic of this study: how and why Latina/o families choose a charter school for their children.

While the school is diverse in many respects, the number of middle class and affluent families applying and enrolling continues to grow. In some instances, families are finding the school a substitute for the private school they currently attend and are eagerly enrolling in order to avoid the high cost of private school tuition. This emerging phenomenon is diminishing the opportunity for families without other high quality educational options at their disposal. As a school leader, this is deeply concerning, as I witness a shift toward a more White and affluent community—the appropriation of an institution whose mission is to provide neighborhood families and students a local high quality public school choice. This appropriation of the school comes at the expense of Latina/o and Black students and families who reside in the local neighborhood and who deserve a high quality public education not always available in their traditional district public school. Therefore, this study has concrete implications for others to learn why Latina/o families apply and enroll in choice schools and how both charter and traditional public schools can better meet their needs.

## Background

The 1983 report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* detailed the declining quality of public education and called upon educational and political leaders to take action to improve an allegedly failing system in desperate need of focus and attention (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). In the decades since its initial publication, extensive educational reform efforts have included myriad programs, initiatives, and research aimed at improving student learning and outcomes of the American educational system as a whole. According to Hattie (2012), despite the pervasiveness and intensity of most school improvement efforts, the results have been mixed—and sometimes even more detrimental than the conditions they were trying attempting to improve.

The diverse demographic landscape of the modern day educational system has presented myriad unique challenges and opportunities, and required systems of schooling to adapt and reframe their approaches to serve the needs of the millions of students enrolled in American schools. Nationally, shifts in the population and student diversity have become the new normal, which has required states, districts, and schools to rethink their practices to be more inclusive and receptive to the students they educate and families they serve. The California Department of Education (2015) reports 60 languages other than English are spoken by over 1,300,000 students in California alone. Nationally, similar facts for language diversity and other demographic characteristics exist as well. While efforts to ensure all students receive an adequate and appropriate education are greatly evidenced, the discontent of families with the schooling system has led many to explore and research options beyond their district-operated neighborhood school (Buckley & Schneider, 2007).

School choice models have existed in the United States for several decades; charter schools, however, have only been an option since 1992. As public, tuition-free institutions, charter schools have gained popularity in many states; 44 states and the District of Columbia have charter schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2018). California has the nation's largest number of charter schools and enrolls over 600,000 students (California Charter Schools Association, 2017). Across the United States, schools in poor and working class neighborhoods enroll primarily Latina/o and/or Black students, which is the result of many factors well beyond the scope of this study. In the greater Los Angeles area, many low-income and working-class communities have experienced an influx of charter schools, which have been established to provide families an alternative to the traditional public schools found in the neighborhood. While some charter schools successfully become part of their neighborhoods, families often lack the knowledge and understanding of the purpose and objectives of charter schools, and thus families and students do not enroll in charter schools. This lack of information or awareness about the purpose of charter schools creates a missed opportunity for students and families to benefit from the educational program being offered.

### **Discrediting Public Schools and the Emergence of the School Choice Movement**

Schooling in the United States is considered a public good that indicates families and students have access to educational opportunities regardless of external factors such as socioeconomic status or geographic location (Schneider, 2016). Schools have been funded by both federal and state dollars and operated by a district with publicly elected school board members who provide leadership, guidance, and oversight of the operation of these schools. For nearly 200 years, public schooling has been a seminal element of American society. In 1832,

Abraham Lincoln described education as “the most important subject we as a people can be engaged in” (Curti, 1959, p. 198). Thomas Jefferson, Alexis de Tocqueville, Horace Mann, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Lawrence Cremin have all passionately recognized the role education has played in shaping the American nation and spirit (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1992; Curti, 1959).

The current public school model was initially established in the late 1700s in Colonial America; early Massachusetts law indicated schools needed to be funded by public dollars for the purpose of educating all children (Schneider, 2016). This early model of education assumed all students required the same schooling and therefore all schools must be operated in the same manner, regardless of the diversity of the student body or of the needs of the community they served (Nathan, 1996; Schneider, 2016). This model suggested identical education as the best way to meet the needs of all students and shifted the focus of schooling and education from students to adults. The standardization of education emerged during the industrial revolution in the early 20th century when schooling was similar to the way factories operated; raw materials were taken by factory workers who shaped and tooled them, and emerged as finished products at the end of the assembly line. Schooling mimicked this structure—students were transformed by teachers using curriculum in the classroom, and emerged as educated students after a set period of time (Schneider, 2016). This mechanical notion of education stands in stark contrast to the vision of educational philosopher John Dewey whose writings at the turn of the 20th century discussed the importance of imparting democratic ideals, critical thinking, and an ethic of care for humanity (Dewey, 2004).

Schneider (2016) detailed many ways in which schools were initially conceived to meet the needs of its population. However massive population booms resulted in the disproportional growth of schools in communities. This unplanned and unforeseen growth—exacerbated by cultural, social, economic, and political forces have formed part of the ongoing discourse of the quality of public education in America.

Twenty years ago, Matthews (1996) wrote about the growing distrust and disillusionment with the government and public schools. He critiqued the ways in which both the “public” and the “schools” had become demanding, insulated, and dysfunctional parties each without a will to compromise and partner to serve the needs of students (Matthews, 1996). According to Murphy and Shiffman (2002), several factors have contributed to these socio-political shifts in America including “fundamental concerns that government simply doesn’t work . . . cynicism and distrust in the public sector to deliver acceptable results” (p. 103). These beliefs and mistrust about the government have carried over and permeated into public education, which is seen as an extension of the Democracy.

In the nearly four decades since *A Nation at Risk*, schools, districts, and states have continued researching, piloting, implementing, and evaluating programs, efforts, and materials aimed at improving the educational achievement of students. With each effort and movement towards improvement, students and families have had to endure new mandates and policies, often at the expense of their long-term education, well-being, and social mobility. In the years since *No Child Left Behind*, standardized testing as evidence of student learning and school performance has become the norm across the country. Schools, districts, and entire states are working arduously to ensure students are making progress on Common Core-aligned

assessments, and are employing instructional coaches, adopting new curricula, and implementing new strategies to ensure students learn and correctly demonstrate their knowledge on these tests. While the current generation of standardized tests look at student growth and learning from a broader perspective, student scores continue being used as proxies for overall school quality.

Other effects of educational policy are evident in the newfound specialization and focus of many district schools. Among these are magnet schools, small learning communities, specialty academies, gender separate schools, and dual-language immersion programs. These myriad school choices offer families and students an array of options aimed at meeting their individual learning needs, preferences, and interests. The response by districts to meet the demands and needs of families models the capitalist society where consumers can buy goods and services from any number of different sellers to meet their needs (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The primary aim of this study was to understand how and why immigrant Latina/o families selected charter schools for their children. The selection of alternatives to local neighborhood schools occurs as a result of various external factors affecting school quality, as discussed below.

The quality of schools across the Los Angeles region can be attributed to myriad factors, including neighborhood makeup, geography, and economics, among others. These external factors directly influence the way schools and districts are organized, operated, and managed. In some poor, immigrant, Latina/o, and/or Black neighborhoods, schools are overcrowded, understaffed, and under-resourced, thereby disadvantaging students and families. Conversely, neighborhoods with high rates of homeownership and property values enjoy programs and



services tailored to meet the demands of the families and students in those communities. The relationship between a community's economic health and wealth and the quality of traditional public schools is visible in neighborhoods across the Los Angeles region.

California's current education funding models offer schools with high percentages of English learners, foster students, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students additional resources to ensure they are addressing the challenges and meeting the needs of these student groups. However, funding is not the sole indicator for school quality nor is it a determinant of the caliber of the educational experiences students receive. Furthermore, school quality is informed by parent and student perception, which can be incorrectly placed based on their individual educational experiences and point of view. Families' perception of school quality varies greatly and can include factors such as curricular and teaching models, teacher credentialing and licensing, the physical school campus and facility, and the availability of co-curricular programs and services. The lenses of race, ethnicity, education level, and socioeconomic class also inform and influence the considerations of school quality.

While myriad factors contribute to a school's quality and performance, alternatives to traditional district schools have emerged in neighborhoods with underperforming schools—specifically by way of charter schools. Despite the 370 charter schools currently in operation in Los Angeles County (California Department of Education, 2017), the large geographic footprint of the county prevents charter schools from operating in every community where the traditional public schools may not be serving the learning needs of students.

Charter schools were conceived to serve as alternatives to traditional public schools and be places where innovative educational approaches could be tested, evaluated, and replicated

(Budde, 1988; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). Philosophically, charter schools aim to improve the education system by challenging norms and understandings with innovative models and approaches. Among charter schools, a variety of organizational and school models exist, each with a unique mission, purpose, and target population. In recent years, not-for-profit charter management organizations (CMO) and for-profit educational management organizations (EMO), both of which focus on charter school growth, impact, and economies of scale, have become more common in urban Black and Latina/o neighborhoods where underperforming public schools are found (Shin, Fuller, & Dauter, 2017). According to the California Department of Education (2017), approximately 172 of the 346 charter schools in Los Angeles County are operated by charter management organizations. Charter management organizations are not-for-profit organizations established to operate and manage charter schools under a common organizational structure; educational management organizations (EMOs) are for-profit companies that operate schools or contract with schools to provide services that typically occur in school district offices (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). These charter organizational models closely resemble traditional district central offices that manage fiscal, administrative, and educational functions of its various schools. A more nuanced and detailed description of EMOs and CMOs is provided in the following chapter.

Charter school location is an additional layer of complexity that directly influences who enrolls at the school and who chooses to teach at the school—and has an impact upon the chosen community. Unlike traditional districts that own the land and buildings where they are located, charter schools must be creative in their quest to find a facility. In many cases, this involves leasing churches or other faith-based institutions that are vacant during the school-week; or they

are found in corporate or commercial facilities that are rehabilitated to function as makeshift schools. Others are co-located with traditional public schools on vacant portions of existing school campuses where students and teachers are often unwelcomed and seen as intruders to their campuses. However, the location of charter schools is further complicated when deeper understandings of economics, political influences, and the charter schools' underlying motivations are also introduced into the discourse (Henig & MacDonald, 2002). Accordingly, charter schools that are mission-driven are more likely to be found in nontraditional spaces and locations; in contrast, market-driven charter schools are more likely to locate in more traditional facilities (Henig & MacDonald, 2002). Thus, charter school founders and operators have significant impact and influence on their communities.

The sociopolitical and economic forces affecting school quality and availability are two additional elements with salience in the discussion of charter schools. The relationships between gentrification of poor and working-class Black and Latina/o communities and the establishment of charter schools have been documented and continue to be found across the nation (Davis & Oakley, 2013; Hankins, 2007; Jordan & Gallagher, 2015). The nexus between charter schools and educated, middle-class individuals occurs at the place where decisions about residence by young families are informed by the quality of schools and lower housing costs. In the greater Los Angeles area, the cost of housing continues to rise thus resulting in more affordable areas, not necessarily inexpensive ones. In some cases, families have come together and worked to establish charter schools as a way of providing themselves and their children an enclave of other similarly-minded individuals (Stillman, 2012). These instances of individuals who are gentrifying neighborhoods attracted to charter schools illustrate the denial of access that Black

and Latina/o families are experiencing in neighborhoods where gentrification is continuing to occur and has not yet pushed out all its original occupants.

Although the initial ideas for charter schools originated in the late 1970s (Budde, 1988), the first charter school was established in 1992 (Nathan, 1996). Twenty-five years later, charter schools are present in 44 states across the country, and in some instances have grown and matured into strong successful educational institutions. The age and maturity of some charter schools is presenting a new dilemma—the appropriation of charter schools by middle-class families with access to educational options. In the Los Angeles region, various communities have experienced the effects of gentrification and the influx of middle- and upper-class families into historically poor, working class, or predominantly Black or Latina/o neighborhoods. In some cases, charter schools were established in these areas years earlier to provide students and families with a quality public school option. Charter schools that have served predominantly Black and/or Latina/o students have seen a shift in their student body as a result of the gentrification of their neighborhoods and communities. New residents are taking advantage of charter schools and viewing them as alternatives to private schools and thus decreasing the chances for enrollment of poor and working-class students and families without other school choices. For many charter schools, their mission of providing high-quality public school alternatives to educationally disenfranchised families is being challenged by the growing number of middle- and upper-class newcomers in their community and schools.

The popularity of some charter schools had led to an increased demand, resulting in extensive waitlists that function as barriers to enrollment for poor, Black, and Latina/o families. California charter law indicates that charter schools that have more students attempting to enroll

than available openings must hold a random public lottery for enrollment. This public lottery is an attempt to prevent charter schools from hand-selecting its students or discriminating against any student or family. The enrollment lottery system is a legal requirement of all California charter schools, where demand for enrollment exceeds available capacity. At its core, the public lottery system offers an interested family the opportunity to enroll at the school, regardless of when they applied, how they applied, or if they have been interested and applied in the past. A charter school's enrollment lottery starts by determining the number of available openings in a school for the following year. The available number of openings at each grade level is established when currently enrolled families indicate their plans for enrollment at the school for the following year. This allows a charter school to create a list of available openings at each grade level offered. Charter schools then compare applications received against available openings, and if the number of applications is greater than the number of openings, then a lottery must be held. This prevents any one applicant from having an advantage over any other applicant thereby equalizing the opportunity to enroll at the charter school.

While the lottery system equalizes a family's chance to enroll, California charter law permits the use of admission preferences in its enrollment policies and practices. With approval from the charter school authorizer, a school may offer admission preferences to students and families who meet specific criteria; some of these include residence in the local attendance area of the closest district public school, students and families eligible to participate in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National School Lunch Program, students of the district where the charter school is located, children of employees of the institution, and siblings of currently enrolled students of the charter school.

These admission preferences are used by schools to ensure they are accessible to families from the local area the population the charter school sets out to serve. In offering these admission preferences, charter schools further their mission of serving students in their local communities and neighborhoods, which may not always have a high quality school option. However, in some communities where gentrification is taking place and well-established charter schools are located, admission preferences are not yielding the intended outcomes of diversity in its student body. Instead of serving families without many educational options, affluent families are purposefully selecting neighborhoods where these charter schools are located and purchasing homes that will allow them to take advantage of the charter school's admission preference. These purchasing decisions are often made by affluent families who can afford rising housing costs in formerly poor and working-class areas. More recently, charter schools and even some traditional public school districts have begun engaging in dialogues about the importance of socioeconomic diversity and integration, which is a demographic variable that crosses lines of race and ethnicity. For charter schools and authorizers, socioeconomic status is a permissible admission preference that can be used as a tactic to ensure access to students and families in the school's target area.

In general, charter schools are accessed by Latina/o families in disparate ways; the enrollment of Latina/o students is either over-representative or under-representative of the neighborhood where the charter school is located. This informs a research question of this study: why do immigrant Latina/o families access charter school options? The growing Latina/o population in the United States coupled with chronic underperformance and attainment, as evidenced by educational achievement gaps, requires tangible action to ensure Latina/o students have access to and receive a quality education in their community (Madrid, 2011).

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was threefold: to understand what factors immigrant Latina/o families considered when researching and selecting a school for their children; to understand how immigrant Latina/o families made meaning of the U.S. educational system; and to learn what immigrant Latina/o families considered characteristics of good schools, teachers, and education as a whole. These interconnected purpose statements were intentionally designed as building blocks to more deeply understand this complex topic.

The diverse immigration histories of the participants of this study, the education from their native countries, and individual experiences with the U.S. education system as parents converged to provide insight into their school selection process. Exploring their beliefs about school quality led to an understanding of the discrepancies between their beliefs and their experiences, thus informing how and why families chose charter schools for their children. By understanding the factors families considered when researching and selecting a school for their children, this study made meaning of the choice process and shed light onto why some families actively research and select a school. This understanding is important for educational researchers, leaders, and practitioners who work to improve the educational outcomes and attainment of all students, and even more for those who view the disparate educational achievement of students of color as a critical social justice issue being faced in the nation.

The prevalence of charter schools in communities has resulted in educational options for families and children who access them. Although this study focused on charter schools, it is important to note that educational quality is a very complex topic involving a multitude of layers, understandings, players, and factors that are both internal and external to education. Despite the

growing presence of charter schools, the quality of charter schools is quite varied. A number of national, state, and local publications have found charter schools vary in quality and do not always perform better than traditional public schools (Wohlstetter, Smith, & Farrell, 2013; Zimmer & Buddin, 2009). The leadership, financial management, and instructional quality have great impact on the quality of a charter school and its longevity. Similarly, not all district schools are underperforming, understaffed, or under-resourced, as is oftentimes presented in the media or in the scholarship favoring school choice, specifically charter schools. A 2015 publication by the Stanford University Center for Research on Education Outcomes found disparate educational outcome attainment in 41 urban areas across 22 states; in some cases, charter schools performed better than traditional public schools, in other areas charter schools performed significantly worse than the traditional public schools in the same urban areas (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2015). While charter schools are often described by proponents as an accessible pathway to a better school, the reality is that this aspirational outcome is not always achieved.

For charter schools to continue to be attractive, relevant, and trustworthy, they must understand the factors Latina/o families consider when researching and selecting a school for their children. This study informs school leaders, practitioners, and policymakers of these factors in order to better serve this growing segment of the population whose educational outcomes continue to be below those of their White peers across the state and the nation (Madrid, 2011).



## **Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study are:

Why and how do immigrant Latina/o parents in the greater Los Angeles area research and apply to charter schools?

What are the factors they consider in their decision making process?

These research questions explored the ways in which the U.S. educational system is understood, and how this understanding is used in the research and selection process of charter schools for their children. These questions generated data that detailed participants' understanding of the education system and the various factors utilized by parents in the school research and selection process. Examination of these factors is set within the context of school choice and the manner in which parents make sense of and understand the growing prevalence of choice schools in their neighborhoods and communities.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The research and literature on the topic of school choice suggests that social, cultural, and economic capital greatly influence the manner parents select schools for their children (Haynes, Phillips & Goldring, 2010; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2014). The scholarship on cultural capital by Bourdieu (1986) and social capital by Coleman (1988) are foundational elements to the topic of school choice and undergird the framework of this study. However, this study utilized updated understandings of capital for Latina/o individuals, which have been presented by Yosso's (2005) writings on cultural community wealth, and Stanton-Salazar's (1997) work on the role institutional agents play in the socialization process for Latino and

African American youth. These Latina/o-centered conceptualizations of capital informed the way school choice for Latina/o families is understood and analyzed in this study.

Bourdieu (1986) indicated that cultural capital exists in the ways which individuals share certain common ways of being and knowing, which form the “habitus” (p. 18)—the unifying characteristics and habits of members of a particular group or class. Therefore, cultural capital, and its relationship to economic capital, privileges individuals who share values, beliefs, and social class and allows lifelong transmission of the capital that characterizes the group. Coleman (1988) wrote about social capital as the way in which social norms and expectations are formulated and passed by members of a particular group or class. Like cultural capital, Coleman suggested, social capital is a commodity that can be kept from individuals, shared by its members, and grown by way of social relationships. He theorized that social capital provides its members with a system of unspoken credits and debits, which are used to call upon favors from those within the group and their acquaintances. The seminal nature of their scholarship generated a foundation for understanding school choice; however, these understandings of social and cultural capital were conceptualized and written from a Western European, White, middle and upper class perspective, which is quite distinct from the population this study focused upon.

Yosso (2005) proposed a new understanding of capital for people of color, which she dubbed *community cultural wealth*. Molded by Critical Race Theory, community cultural wealth shifts the deficit model typically applied to people of color, and names six forms of capital not described by Bourdieu (1986) or Coleman (1988). Community cultural wealth highlights the value of language, family history, aspirations, resistance, and social networks, and names them as forms of capital that are absent from traditional understandings of cultural capital (Bourdieu,

1986) and social capital (Coleman, 1988). The six different forms of capital described by Yosso (2005) disrupt the narrow understandings of social and cultural capital and advance the ideals of CRT and Latino critical theory (LatCrit), which call for naming and understanding the racist structures and institutions that permeate our society.

Sociologist Richard Stanton-Salazar (1997) discussed the key role institutional agents and educational institutions play in the socialization process of African American and Latino youth. His perspective takes Coleman's (1988) social capital theory and details the important role schools, counselors, teachers, and other non-family members take on to become networks of support and information that are typically found within a family or social class grouping. Although this network is beneficial, Stanton-Salazar recognized the burden African American and Latino youth face in relying on a social network outside of their familial environment and therefore experience decreased social mobility in comparison to White youth. Coleman suggested that social capital is a characteristic of White upper and middle class individuals and families; therefore in African American and Latino households and communities, institutional agents and institutions supplant the role of family and social networks and become the access point to information, networks, and resources.

The scholarship of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) undergird the theoretical framework of this study. These updated conceptualizations are used to understand the way Latina/o parents research and select a school for their children. To help further examine the intersection of Latina/o parents and school choice, this theoretical framework considers the various forms of capital not captured by traditional notions of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) or social capital (Coleman, 1988).

## **Research Design and Methodology**

To understand the complex school research and selection process for Latina/o immigrant families, this study utilized a qualitative research methodology. This methodology was chosen with the intent of interpreting phenomena in the natural environment in which it occurs (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

This qualitative research study was conducted using a narrative inquiry approach (Chase, 2005; Rappaport, 1993; Webster & Mertova, 2007), which provided participants a means of “understanding their experienced life and story” (Rappaport, 1993, p. 240). Narrative inquiry allowed participants to construct and retell their individual stories with intentionality and focused on the subjects, their language, and the events shared, which became the data of the study (Flick, 2014; Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2013). Capturing and analyzing life stories shed light onto critical life events, which reflected the belief that experience is a part of development and growth; these insights served as powerful reminders of the power of individual voices and stories (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Thirteen participants were selected using purposive sampling technique (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012) to identify and select participants who met the following criteria: self-identification as Latina or Latino, self-identification as an immigrant to the United States, and parents of child who currently attends or has attended a charter school in the greater Los Angeles area. Participants for this study were not limited to a single site or location, but rather came from the researchers’ personal and professional network and from the charter school where the researcher is employed as a school administrator.

To understand the school choice process for Latina/o families, face-to-face narrative interviews were conducted by the researcher (Flick, 2014). Narrative interviews shifted the dynamic of interviewer-interviewee into one of narrator and listener for the purpose of obtaining a deep understanding of the story being shared and the meaning-making processes occurring during the interview (Chase, 2005; Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) defined the narrative interview as consisting of five phases: “preparation, initiation, main narration, questioning phase, and concluding talk” (p. 60).

Audio recordings and transcripts of interviews served as the data source for this study. Fraser’s (2004) seven phases of narrative analysis informed the data analysis process of this study. Each of the seven phases guided the data analysis process and provided the researcher with various reflection questions that were pertinent to the specific phase of the analysis. The first phase focused on listening for the emotions and feelings shared by participants during the interview; the second phase was the transcription of the interviews, which allowed the researcher to reconnect to the participant by way of their words; the third phase was interpretation of the transcript, which was the point at which stories were chunked into manageable pieces for deeper analysis. The fourth phase of the analysis consisted in determining the existence of other dimensions within the story being shared; this included interpersonal, cultural, structural, and intrapersonal dimensions that may have been shared by the participant. The fifth phase of narrative analysis (Fraser, 2004) involved listening for popular discourses that were told by participants; the sixth phase began identifying themes and commonalities across participants, the seventh and final phase was writing the analysis derived from the participants’ stories.

## **Relevance to Social Justice**

This study focused on why and how Latina/o parents selected charter schools for their children. The intersections of race, socioeconomic class, and immigration status are oftentimes the point where underperforming schools exist, and where students, families, and entire communities are left behind and forgotten. Schools in these areas have been deemed underperforming, and entire neighborhoods and communities many times have few options for different educational opportunities than those available in their traditional public school.

This study gave voice to parents who turned to charter schools as a way of providing a better quality educational experience to their children. As immigrant parents, participants indicated their primary role as parents is to provide a better life and greater opportunities to their children. By providing a space for dialogue and discourse about the topic of school choice, this research gave participants the opportunity to think about their personal beliefs and reflect upon their experiences and the experiences of their children. The ability for parents to explicitly think about their lives is a privileged act, which is typically inaccessible, particularly as working-class individuals and immigrants. In addition, parents who participated in this study were able to have any questions about the complexities of the educational system answered by the researcher, a lifelong educator. By understanding parents' indicators of school quality and their selection factors, this research can be shared with educational leaders, practitioners, and scholars to highlight the importance of listening to the needs of communities and neighborhoods they aim to serve.

Over the past 25 years, charter schools have become part of the local and national conversation surrounding schooling in America. Charter school leaders and advocates must be

vigilant of the role they play in reshaping the educational landscape, particularly in communities of color, where families have competing, complex, and diverse educational, socioemotional, and financial needs. Leaders must navigate the needs of the community and neighborhood along with the mission and vision of their respective organizations and ensure these are not in conflict or do not impose a system of education that is disconnected from the realities of the students and families they serve. Furthermore, the emerging phenomenon of appropriation of charter schools by affluent families to sidestep the financial costs of private schooling, at the cost of limiting access to Latina/o and Black families who do not always have quality school options available, must also be considered. This co-opting of charter schools is an emerging trend evidenced in neighborhoods and communities where gentrification is occurring across the Los Angeles region.

Through this study, the researcher further described the ways in which social and cultural capital look different for Latina/o families. It is important for schools to be cognizant that capital looks different for diverse students and their families (Monkman, Roland, & Theramene, 2005; Yosso, 2005). The traditional notions of these concepts were written from a privileged, Western-European perspective and do not recognize language, customs, and Latina/o cultural practices as valuable forms of making meaning in the world around them. As such, this study informed educational practitioners of new and different ways Latina/o parents and students bring community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) into schools and educational institutions. This different manifestation of capital is important for educators, as it serves to disrupt the historical deficiency model of people of color that is found in many institutions, including schools (Yosso, 2005).

## **Significance of the Study**

This study was significant given the increasingly diverse educational landscape across the state and nation. As the Latina/o population continues to grow, it is imperative that Latina/o families have access to quality schools in their communities. Through the myriad educational options, including traditional public schools, magnet, charter, and other choice mechanisms, institutions must make good on their responsibility of educating all students.

The results of this study can be used by educational leaders, practitioners, and policymakers to understand the needs of Latina/o families as related to the education of their children. While educational institutions have traditionally existed to serve their communities, too often schools have remained stagnant in their approaches and have not been responsive to or inclusive of the changing needs and demographics of the students and families they serve. While charter school proponents contend that the bureaucratic nature of school districts and outdated organizational models prevent innovation in education, opponents contend that the autonomy granted to charter schools is not subject to scrutiny, which leads to financial, operational, and organizational mismanagement. This dichotomous narrative, which places traditional public schools against charter schools, is overly simplified and excludes the vast diversity of the educational institutions encompassed within each segment.

Educational institutions have an obligation to provide quality learning experiences and interactions for both students and families. Latina/o families aspire for their children to obtain a quality education resulting in increased educational attainment, long-term success, and upward social mobility for themselves and their families. This increased attainment is hoped to enrich the lives of students and families as a whole, and therefore yield a better standard of living. By



learning the factors considered when selecting a charter school, institutional leaders can do a better job to understand the needs of the families and communities they serve.

This study also generated data to inform researchers and practitioners about the ways Latina/o families exhibit the various characteristics of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) as an additional way of understanding their experiences with the US educational system. While this study focused on factors used in the research and school choice process, a broader understanding of capital through the experience of the participants illustrated the ways that historical notions of social and cultural capital are unable to wholly describe capital for Latina/o individuals.

The researcher intends for this study to become a part of the broader educational discourse surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion. The hyper-segregation occurring in many schools across the United States is concerning and merits a critical analysis of its effects. By understanding parental perspectives surrounding schooling and the educational system, leaders can think critically about the ways educational institutions can be reframed to serve families and their own desegregation efforts.

The researcher intends to develop this study into a long-term line of research surrounding school choice. The current study focused on parents who are the primary decision makers about schooling. However the researcher envisions this becoming a recurring research project that examines the ways students and parents jointly select a high school, followed by a study examining the school choice factors by high school seniors when selecting an undergraduate institution, and subsequently learning from college seniors or graduates about their selection patterns for graduate or professional school.

### **Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions**

The primary delimitation of this study was the demographic of the population selected to participate in this study. This study focused on the voice and experience of immigrant Latina/o families in the greater Los Angeles area. This narrow segment of the population was selected because it has a pattern of being underserved and marginalized in terms of educational advancement and attainment opportunities (Ortiz, 1995). Additionally, this study focused on just 13 participants, which was not proportionally reflective of the broader Latina/o immigrant population of the region.

These threats to external validity are limitations of this study; however, the number of participants was considered sufficient, as the purpose was to deeply understand this topic in a narrow context and not have the findings serve as a proxy for the general population. Another possible limitation of this study was the sole use of qualitative inquiry methods to understand the topic; however, the nature of this study would not fully encapsulate the richness of participant voice and experience through quantitative methods.

Underlying this study were several assumptions about this topic and its participants. The first assumption of this study was that parents who have chosen charter schools have been intentional in their research and decision-making process. This intentionality encompasses a process of researching including reading school reviews, school site visits, and discussions with parents of children at the school, as described by Villavicencio (2013). However, a possibility existed and emerged that schools were chosen for convenience rather than by intention. Through the research process, these elements became part of the data and were reported in the findings section of this study. The second assumption in this study pertained to the findings and their

significance. The researcher functioned from the perspective that parents who chose a charter school for their children did so because they were displeased with their geographically assigned school. This reasoning assumed, therefore, that departure from one school occurred in order to pursue a better school. The data analysis phase of this study offered greater insight into the reasons for selecting and enrolling at charter schools and the impetus for departure from schools.

### **Key Terms**

*Immigrant:* This study focused on the lived experiences of individuals who were not born in the United States. This segment of the population was selected for its diverse connection and understanding of the US education system, which privileges individuals with a strong knowledge and grasp of its structures, and grows with sustained interaction with the system.

*Latina/o:* This study explored the concept of school choice with individuals who identified as Latina/Latino or a variation of the term. In exploring the myriad options and choices for naming members of this population, the term *Latina/o* was chosen as a way of honoring the voice, struggles, and experiences of the participants of this study, which were the most critical element of this study. The term Latino, while oftentimes used to include both the male and female genders, does more to deny than include. Although the terms Latin@ and Latinx have emerged in recent scholarship with compelling arguments for their use (Cantu & Franquiz, 2010; Scharrón-del Río & Aja, 2015), these terms were not part of the vocabulary of the participants of this study, whose voices were its central focus.

*School choice:* School choice is the concept that established an educational system designed to serve as an alternative to traditional public schools. Historically, school choice was established as a way for individuals to opt out of participating in their traditional public school

and featured school vouchers as the primary choice method. The current school choice movement includes charter schools, voucher programs, magnet schools, open enrollment models, parochial, and independent/private schools.

*Traditional public school:* For over 200 years, public schools have been operated by a district, which operates the schools within a defined geographic area of a city or state.

Traditional public schools enroll students based on school attendance boundaries, which limit the students who may enroll in a specific school by the geographic location of their residence.

### **Organization of Dissertation**

The first chapter of this dissertation offered an overview of school choice for immigrant Latina/o families in the greater Los Angeles region. The following chapter contains the literature review of historical and contemporary research on relevant topics to this study and formed the foundation to understanding the topic of school choice for Latina/o families. Chapter 3 details the methods that were used for conducting this qualitative research study. Chapter 4 contains the findings of the study, including the themes that emerged through the data analysis process. Finally, Chapter 5 contains a discussion of the implications and utility of the research findings and their practical application for parents, school leaders, school districts, educational scholars, and other stakeholders.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Overview**

For immigrant Latina/o families, some of whom have no formal education themselves, the complex U.S. schooling system is a daunting and intimidating institution. Uninviting and unwelcoming environments, language barriers, and little knowledge of how to navigate the system become obstacles to families interested in being engaged in their child's education. Although private schools, charter schools, and other choice models are available in many states and communities, access to information about these choices prevents some students and families from taking advantage of them. When Latina/o families do explore choice options, the qualities that comprise a good school are oftentimes convoluted and based on external factors and not indicators of quality at the school level. This study explored the factors considered by immigrant Latina/o families in the selection of charter schools for their children.

Throughout its history, American public education has continuously been the target of reform efforts aimed at improving the quality of education and outcomes of its students. (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). This continuous examination has produced myriad reform movements and initiatives that have resulted in significant changes but seldom yielded the desired outcomes for students. As desired achievement targets are missed by the latest reform initiative, program, or curriculum, districts and schools spin the wheel to see what new efforts can be implemented to improve student learning. While this occurs, teachers, students, and parents become the primary load bearers as they endure the whiplash of yet another change. The democratic ideals of education as a public good established schooling as a consistent part of the American fabric that

aims to provide educational opportunities for all students and communities. However the reality is otherwise, and many families face the difficult decision of exploring and selecting schools beyond those to which they are geographically bound. Charter, magnet, parochial, and independent schools all exist to offer families a school choice other than what is available and accessible in their local neighborhoods. Choice schools typically have a primary focus—arts education, science or engineering, college-bound, or are religiously affiliated, which all serve as attractors to families. The unifying element of choice schools is that they exist to provide families and students with an alternative to the district-operated school found in local neighborhoods. Although choice options exists in nearly all states across the nation, many families lack the knowledge of the purpose of choice schools, and therefore do not exercise their right to choose a better school than what has been assigned to them based on their address. This is particularly true and pertinent for the burgeoning Latina/o population in the United States.

This chapter delves into the literature that forms the theoretical framework by reviewing social capital, cultural capital as well as institutional agents and community cultural wealth that shaped this study. Next, the chapter details some of the major policy and reform movements in American education over the past three decades. Beginning in the early 1980s, a series of public and private groups and commissions issued calls for reforms to improve the quality of public education. These initiatives set the foundation for understanding the establishment and proliferation of the school choice movement, specifically charter schools. This chapter then discusses the two major primary school choice models: voucher programs and charter schools. Charter schools are granted more attention as they are the particular segment of school choice being studied. Given the storied nature of charter schools, this section also discusses the

dichotomous rhetoric between public district schools and charter schools. Then, the chapter looks at the intersection of school choice and social justice, which forms a salient part of this study. Next is a review of the history, enrollment, attainment, challenges, and success of Latina/o students in the American education system. This segues into the extant literature that informs the intersection of Latina/o families and school choice. The chapter concludes by identifying salient gaps in the research found during the course of this literature review.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Exploring the factors immigrant Latina/o families consider when researching and selecting a school for their children is understood in this dissertation through the framework of social and cultural capital. The scholarship on school choice consistently presented social, cultural, and economic capital as the lenses that situated this topic. In this section, social and cultural capital were explained in detail as these are the foundational frameworks of this study. This section covers the historical foundations of social and cultural capital, followed by an examination of the scholarship on capital from a Latina/o perspective, including social relationships and institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and concludes with a re-envisioned model of capital that best fits the topic of this study.

Cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and social capital (Coleman, 1988) are the seminal concepts that formed the basis for understanding social and cultural capital for Latina/o individuals. These correspondence theories offer foundational understanding of capital; however, this study examined the school choice for Latina/o families through the more localized understandings of social and cultural capital as theorized by Stanton-Salazar (1997) and Yosso

(2005). Undertaking this study through the lens of external social networks proposed by Stanton-Salazar (1997) and the variations of capital found in cultural community wealth (Yosso, 2005) is of principal importance, as this scholarship takes into account the diverse perspectives of capital that are not accounted for by Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988).

### **Cultural Capital**

French scholar Pierre Bourdieu wrote about cultural capital in the 1986 book *Forms of Capital*. There, he contended that cultural capital exists in three forms “the embodied state in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, in the objectified state in the form of cultural goods, and in the institutionalized state in the form of objectification” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 17). The embodied state relates to the ways in which cultural capital achieves a nearly tangible state, closely approaching the point of commoditization. It encompasses the “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 18) and understandings that form the basis of being and identifying oneself as a member of a group, religion, or class. Embodiment, he proposed, also encapsulates the method by which cultural capital is transmitted through the lifelong socialization process. Furthermore, Bourdieu (1986) discussed the link between cultural and economic capital and the manner in which the availability of time (economic capital) facilitates its transmission and acquisition.

The objectified state of cultural capital includes “material objects and media, such as writings, paintings, monuments, instruments” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 19). Although these are material in nature, and therefore also constitute economic capital, the symbolic value and status of these objects transcends their economic value, thereby rendering them cultural capital. The institutionalized state of cultural capital refers to the value and status of academic education and qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). He suggested that academic qualifications and cultural capital



are correlated and, therefore, individuals with certain backgrounds are likely to have greater cultural capital, and vice versa. Similar to the embodied and objectified states, the institutionalized state can be commodified and given an economic capital value, as educational options are oftentimes constrained by economic factors.

### **Social Capital**

Social capital was initially conceptualized by James Coleman in his seminal work *Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital* (1988). He posited that social capital consists of three interrelated forms “obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms” (Coleman, 1988, p. 95) that exist within the context of social relationships. Social relationships are the critical aspect that allows for the facilitation of transactions—both economic and noneconomic, which generate a level of trust and security not available to outsiders, and create a certain level of value that can be used to achieve interests and objectives (Coleman, 1988). The social relationship element provides a nearly invisible level of value that is solely available to those with whom a relationship exists. It is through these social relationships, then, that social capital can exist.

Coleman (1988) explained the notion of obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness of structures as the reciprocal tasks and understandings that take place between individuals. To illustrate this concept, he used the analogy of credits and debits, which exist in an unwritten manner, but are understood by the participants of the system. Two foundational pillars of this notion are trustworthiness that these credits and debits will be repaid when called upon, and the relative comparability of said credits and debits. To further illustrate this point, Coleman (1988) used a political example of a ranking legislator who used his or her accumulated obligations to

have legislation passed with relative ease. The legislator is therefore “calling in” his or her credits and relying on those with outstanding debts to make good on their obligations.

The concept of information channels can be summarized as using individuals as sources of information (Coleman, 1988). Although information is readily available, individuals rely on their social relations to serve as seekers and summarizers of information, which they can use in their favor. This results in individuals not needing to spend copious time and energy seeking information, but rather their social capital enables them to easily obtain information through their social relations.

The third concept of social capital are norms and effective sanctions, which Coleman (1988) asserted are the shared understandings and values that guide behavior and maintain structure and order within a group or community. He wrote, “A prescriptive norm within a collectivity that constitutes an especially important form of social capital is the norm that one should forgo self-interest and act in the interests of the collectivity” (Coleman, 1988, p. 104). While norms and sanctions are a powerful form of social capital as they facilitate actions, they also serve to limit or constrain individuals from acting for fear of not complying or fitting into the structures of the group. The following section delves into the extant literature that looks at social and cultural capital in the Latina/o community that was the focus of this dissertation study.

### **Social and Cultural Capital in the Latina/o Community**

Both social and cultural capital are grounded in White European roots—from its authors, to the sites of the research that led to the formation of the theories explaining them. While Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) established the theoretical foundations of social and cultural capital, a new era of scholarship attempting to detail and apply capital for Latina/o

individuals and communities has emerged. Work by scholars such as Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992), Monkman et al. (2005), Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt, and Moll (2011), Stanton-Salazar (1997), and Yosso (2005) offer perspectives on social and cultural capital unique to the Latina/o community.

Through a sociological lens, Stanton-Salazar (1997) examined the socialization process of Latino and African American youth and compared it to the process for middle and upper class White individuals. He suggested that social capital, as detailed by Coleman (1988), fails to capture the variations of social capital for African American and Latino youth, specifically the formal socialization that occurs via schooling. Due to their “lower status” (Coleman, 1988, p. 4), minority individuals do not always have access to social networks and resources that facilitate social mobility and access to opportunities and privileges available to those of higher status. Therefore, minority individuals rely on institutional agents, whom he defined as “those individuals who have the capacity and commitment to transmit directly, or negotiate the transmission of, institutional resources and opportunities” (Coleman, 1988, p. 6). Stanton-Salazar indicated that White and middle class students have access to these institutional agents in their local community as clergy, neighbors, and sometimes in their own parents. However, for many African American and Latino youth, this is not the case, and access to these agents may only be in schools and other institutions in the form of counselors, teachers, and other adults who are not part of their family. Therefore, institutional agents function as the social network, or a form of social capital in its historical sense, that is not readily available to Latino and African American youth in the same way as it is for middle class and White youth.

Stanton-Salazar's (1997) framework acknowledged the challenges faced by youth who do not have the social networks and capital readily accessible. He stated, "In sum, the development of social ties to institutional agents is crucial to the social development and empowerment of ethnic minority children" (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 15). However, the reliance on institutional agents outside of their home environments, places an undue burden and prevents youth from growing their social capital for the purposes of social mobility in the same way middle class and White youth do. Sociologist Nan Lin (1999) has also discussed the diminished opportunities for social mobility when individuals do not have access to social capital. The unavailability of a network's resources, therefore, serves as a gatekeeper and limits the possibilities for an individual to access said resources (Lin, 1999). This decreased opportunity for social mobility corresponds to the burden experienced by minority youth who rely on institutional agents as forms of social capital as discussed by Stanton-Salazar (1997).

In this study, institutional agents, as described by Stanton-Salazar (1997), are individuals parents encounter in their communities who have access to information and other forms of social capital. These agents may be school officials, community liaisons, or day/child care facility staff who are knowledgeable about the U.S. school system and who facilitate access to their network in order to assist them. For purposes of this study, however, institutional agents are not always linked to an educational institution but they do serve to bridge and connect individuals to sources of information in the same way Stanton-Salazar (1997) described.

Critical race theorist Tara Yosso (2005) proposed a model for understanding capital that more closely aligns with the topic of this dissertation study. She wrote,

cultural community wealth is a critical race theory (CRT) principle that challenges traditional interpretations of cultural capital . . . it shifts the lens away from a deficit view

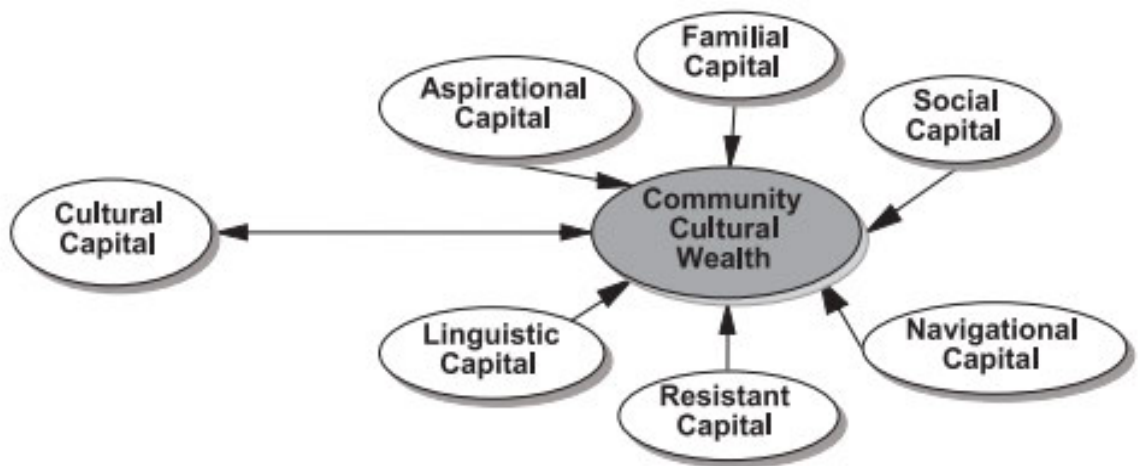
of Communities of Color and focuses on the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts. (p. 69)

Critical race theory emerged from the field of critical legal studies, which focused on the way the law and legal system maintains racial inequality and stratification in post-Civil Rights America (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). A foundational element of CRT is naming racism as a historical, present, and prevalent element of society and recognizing that most institutions, including educational institutions, are inherently oppressive and racist (Villalpando, 2004). Since its inception, CRT has been grounded in the Black and White race binary without much recognition for the diverse experiences of people who are not Black. To generate a deeper understanding of the way other communities of color experience racism, the “family tree of CRT” (Yosso, Villalpando, Delgado Bernal, & Solorzano, 2001, p. 93) has emerged and includes Latino critical theory (LatCrit), Feminist critical theory (FemCrit), Asian critical theory (AsianCrit), Tribal critical theory (TribalCrit), and White critical theory (WhiteCrit). Specifically, LatCrit exposes institutions and their policies and practices that oppress and perpetuate racist systems against Latina/o individuals. While CRT and LatCrit are closely related and very similar, LatCrit also considers “language, immigration, culture, identity, phenotype, and sexuality” (Villalpando, 2004).

Informed by critical race theory and Latino critical theory, Yosso (2005) broadened the understandings of cultural capital as explained by Bourdieu (1986) and presented community cultural wealth as a model, suggesting capital consists of six elements (See Figure 1); these are:

1. Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future even in the face of real and perceived barriers;

2. Linguistic capital includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style;
3. Familial capital refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition;
4. Social capital can be understood as networks of people and community resources
5. Navigational capital refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions...not created with Communities of Color in mind
6. Resistant capital refers to those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality (Yosso, 2005, pp. 77–80).



*Figure 1.* Community cultural wealth model (Yosso, 2005).

This model shifts the understanding and historical legacy describing people of color as deficient and lacking social and cultural capital and validates their lived experiences as

valuable assets (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Yosso, 2005). The reframing of capital for people of color also exposes the “need to restructure US social institutions around those knowledges, skills, abilities, and networks- the community cultural wealth” (Yosso, 2005, p. 82).

### **Capital in School Choice**

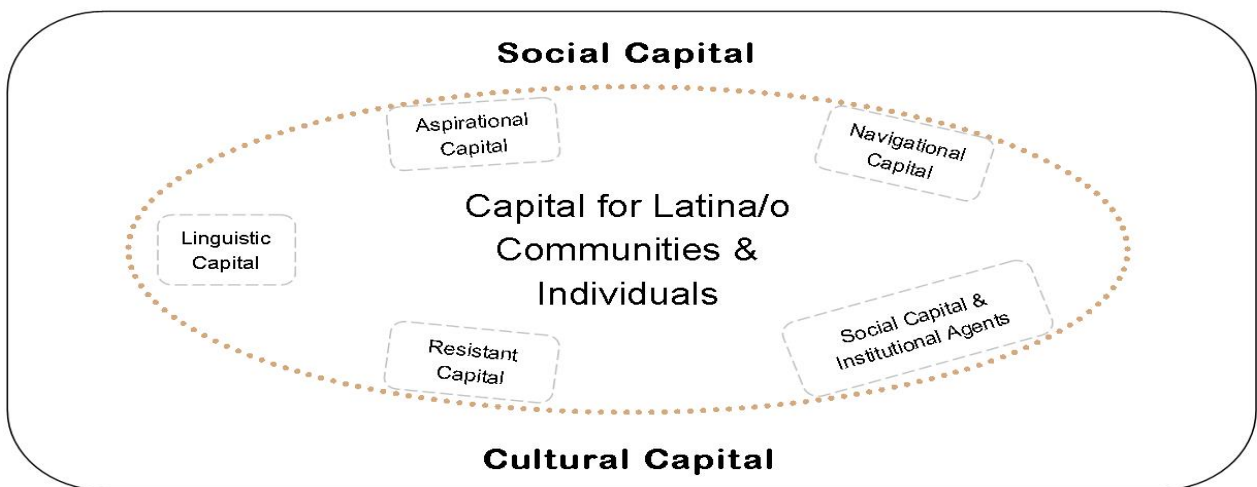
Several researchers have discussed the ways social capital and cultural capital are used to inform the school choice process for families (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2014; Schneider, Teske, Marschall, Montrom, & Roch, 1997). Haynes et al. (2010) discussed how “vastly different educational backgrounds” (p. 758) of Latino parents result in the nonlinear selection process of magnet schools. Fuller and Elmore (1996) offered an anthology discussing the rationale for school choice and the unequal effects school choice has on various communities. However, these scholars all approach the topic from a monolithic perspective—one of deficiency that does not make sense of the nuances of social and cultural capital for students and communities of color. Deficit thinking refers to the prevalence of schools and educators to view low-income and minority students and families as being the problem in terms of their overall attainment and achievement in school (Garcia & Guerra, 2004). This flawed perspective shifts the onus of responsibility from the oppressive educational institutions and educators onto the families, whom they feel send “these children enter school without the prerequisite knowledge and skills and parents neither value nor support their education” (Garcia & Guerra, 2004, p. 151).

To best understand the process by which immigrant Latina/o families select schools for their children, this study used Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model and Stanton-Salazar’s (1997) writings on socialization and the role of institutional agents as a

form of social capital for Latino individuals. Reframing social and cultural capital as community cultural wealth is a necessary push for advancing and further understanding the diverse and rich history and value of the Latina/o community in this study. The objective of understanding the school choice patterns for families is expected to yield greater richness when understood through these culturally relevant forms of capital—as opposed to the traditional notions of capital narrowly defined by Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988).

Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth best encapsulates the diverse ways Latina/o families gain knowledge and information about schools for their children. Figure 2 depicts the framework for understanding the topic of school choice for Latina/o families in this study.

*Figure 2.* Theoretical framework model.



In this model, capital for Latina/o communities and individuals exists within the larger context of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and social capital (Coleman, 1988). However, it allows for a variety of manifestation of capital derived from community cultural



wealth (Yosso, 2005) and institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). These detailed forms of capital are described in detail below.

Aspirational capital refers to the optimistic nature of individuals and the manner in which, despite obstacles, they maintain a healthy and positive outlook for their future and that of their children. By focusing on future goals and aspirations, barriers become manageable elements that need to be overcome in order to reach their personal achievements and accomplishments. Navigational capital is understood as the skills and knowledge developed by individuals and communities to understand and operate within systems not designed with their needs and culture in mind. This is particularly relevant to this discussion, as the educational system continues to be dotted with gatekeepers, convoluted structures, and bureaucracies that overtly and covertly deny opportunities for success to students and families. Navigational capital is also about the agency that is developed in the ways families and individuals need to decipher and make sense of complex systems such as healthcare, employment, legal system, or educational institutions.

Social capital and institutional agents refers to the people who are the resources and contacts that provide support and information. The social networks of Latina/o individuals can be accessed and activated for a particular purpose, or simply for the camaraderie among individuals of common cultures. Institutional agents are similar to the information channels described by Coleman (1988) but are also individuals who can facilitate access to their own networks and sources of information and serve as a connector for others (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). In this conceptualization, institutional agents share a common community or connection.

Linguistic capital is the value of multilingualism and the ways in which Latina/o individuals make use of multiple languages and communication styles to operate in their world.

Linguistic capital includes bilingualism, and extends to the multitude of skills developed by individuals to be storytellers and guardians of family history as a way of maintaining and keeping their culture alive. Resistant capital refers to the transmission of knowledge and information about the ways of opposing structures and systems that outwardly aim to subordinate individuals and communities. This is evidenced in the way it has been instilled in students to stand up for themselves when faced with a problem or issue, or when adults seek guidance and counsel when they feel they have been victims of an unjust system, structure, or policy.

This theoretical framework helps explain the ways in which Latina/o families select a school for their children. Its detailed and nuanced descriptors of capital allow for different and more inclusive forms of capital that traditional understandings exclude. By having a more inclusive model, institutions are also able to go beyond their deficit thinking (Garcia & Guerra, 2004) and see the value in the multitude of knowledge, skills, and understandings—forms of capital—Latina/o students and families possess.

The school choice movement was facilitated through myriad public and educational policies and programs that enabled its proponents to advance its goals and ideals. The following section contains a detailed look at the various policies and programs that helped school choice grow to its current state, and then discusses the concept of school choice and its popular iterations.

### **Education Policy:**

#### **Standardization, Accountability, and the School Choice Movement**

Education policy sets the context for the school choice movement in America. Federal, state, and local policies have had lasting effects on the modern day schooling system and the

educational practices currently being implemented in schools across the country. For decades, educational policies have attempted to influence the public education system to become more effective at educating students who become the future American workforce (Schneider, 2016). These policies have particular relevance as they rationalize much of the change that has taken place in the public education system, and the many alternatives that have emerged in the school choice movement.

### **A Nation at Risk**

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published its landmark report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. This publication was a call to action indicating that the American education system was in steep decline and action and intervention was desperately needed (Nathan, 1996). The report detailed the decline in performance by American students as indicated on various metrics including literacy rates of high school graduates, SAT scores, and even military entrance examinations. After presenting a case for why action was needed, the report analyzed and provided recommendations in four major areas—content, time, teaching, and expectations. Overall, the recommendations offered the education system a series of quick fixes that the commission believed would alleviate the “rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 9).

The impact of *A Nation at Risk* on educational reform and school choice is undeniable. Its publication came at the height of the Cold War, when a conservative-led Washington government had as a primary objective to elevate the United States to the position of global superpower both militarily and economically. *A Nation at Risk* grew to be so popular that it

became one of President Reagan's major platforms during his presidency; he linked education to the demanding needs of the nation and the world (Ansary, 2007).

In a reflective piece by several researchers of the American Institutes for Research, Bohrnstedt (2013) wrote that the legacy of *A Nation at Risk* has been present in all major educational reform movements since its publication. He noted,

We have seen Effective Schools, Accelerated Schools, and Schools Within Schools [ . . . ] the standards movement of the 1990s [ . . . ] the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act- better known as No Child Left Behind [ . . . ] Race to the Top, and now Common Core. (Bohrnstedt, 2013, para. 1)

Each of these major initiatives was a response to *A Nation at Risk* and a call for action to ensure students were demonstrating learning in quantifiable and reportable manners.

Birman (2013) asserts *A Nation at Risk* strengthened the role of the federal government in education policy, and weakened state and local control of public education.

As for its effect on the school choice movement, each of the major policies that emerged after *A Nation at Risk* called for better schools aimed at improving the allegedly broken public education system (Birman, 2013). This report served as the guiding architecture of the modern educational reform movement, including the privatization movement and the eventual conceptualization and establishment of charter schools and other public school alternatives to traditional district schools. Charter schools and the promise to improve the learning outcomes of students, emerged from the need for improved educational outcomes for students, as noted by Albert Shanker (1988) and detailed further in this chapter.

## **Goals 2000**

In 1994, President Bill Clinton signed into law *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (H.R. 104 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 1994), which was the outcome of an education summit hosted by President

Bush in 1989. This summit, held at the University of Virginia, called upon state governors to convene and discuss the future of American education. Ansary (2007) noted, “Astonishingly, no teachers, professional educators, cognitive scientists, or learning experts were invited . . . Education was too important, it seemed, to leave it to educators” (para. 25). *Goals 2000* became a federal educational reform act aimed at clarifying the role of the federal, state, and local government in education policy (Heise, 1994). As a whole, the act established a series of systemic reforms with the intent of standardizing educational policies and practices across the nation. Some of the major goals of *Goals 2000* included “school readiness, school completion, student achievement and citizenship, teacher education and professional development, mathematics and science, adult literacy and lifelong learning, safe disciplined, alcohol-and-drug free schools, and parental participation” (H.R. 1804 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 1994).

Specifically pertaining to choice schools, *Goals 2000* included a provision that allowed states to use federal education funds to “promote public magnet schools, public charter schools, and other mechanism for increasing choice among public schools” (Sautter, 1993). The availability of funds to establish magnet, charter, and other choice schools allowed for the authorization and operation of more options for families to meet the growing demand for school choices at that time. Just 3 years earlier, Minnesota was the first state in the nation to pass legislation allowing charter schools to be established; California enacted similar legislation in 1992; by 1994, 11 states had enacted laws permitting charter schools to operate.

### **No Child Left Behind**

The departure of the Clinton Administration ushered in President George H. W. Bush and the establishment of the now-infamous *No Child Left Behind Act* [NCLB] of 2001 (No Child Left

Behind Act of 2001, 2002). NCLB brought a new set of educational reform initiatives to the educational landscape—with multiple aims. These included the monitoring of student progress by the federal government; ensuring students of color, students with disabilities, poor students, and English language learners were demonstrating academic achievement; and where gains were not demonstrated, states and schools were penalized with a loss of federal funding (Klein, 2015).

In order to achieve its goals, NCLB placed extraordinary pressure on schools, districts, and states to demonstrate student learning and achievement on standardized tests by setting high achievement targets. By 2014, all students—including socioeconomically disadvantaged students, English language learners, students with disabilities, and all minority students—were supposed to demonstrate full proficiency in English language arts and mathematics on state-developed standardized tests (NCLB, 2002). Individual states were given the autonomy to set their own annual targets with the final goal of 100% student proficiency by 2014. In most states, these targets were unattainable and resulted in many schools and districts being classified as being in “Program Improvement”; this designation entailed a series of additional interventions at the local level. Other elements of NCLB included requirements for highly qualified teachers in every classroom, annual testing for all students in grades third through eighth, and once in high school.

One provision of NCLB established that schools designated in Program Improvement (PI) would need to provide families with information about their options and choices for schools their children could attend if they chose to move them from their current school. The Program Improvement label came as result of at least 3 years of not meeting “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) on state-standardized tests (NCLB, 2002). At the point when schools failed to meet their

AYP, they were required to inform families of their options to attend other schools within their school district that were not in Program Improvement and provide transportation as well. As schools, and in some cases entire districts were labeled as being in Program Improvement, charter schools became a viable choice for many families and students. According to enrollment trends published by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2014), enrollment in charter schools rose from 1.1 million in 2005 to over 1.8 million in 2010 when many schools were under federal Program Improvement designation. Although a multitude of solutions to improving education were possible, charter schools grew exponentially in response to the sheer number of traditional public schools designated in Program Improvement under NCLB.

### **Race to the Top**

In 2009, during the Obama presidency, the Race to the Top (RttT) grant program was launched as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). This federal grant opportunity program made available over \$4 billion to states that were able to demonstrate significant improvement efforts to teaching and learning at the state level. The grant application and review process was extensive and provided financial support for states that were willing to make systemic changes including more rigorous academic standards and assessments; creating data systems to be used by teachers, schools, and states to monitor and track student achievement and performance; strengthening the teacher pipeline to ensure effective training, development, and rewarding of qualified individuals in the teaching profession; and identifying ways of transforming the nation's lowest-performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Although RttT intended to incentivize educational reform with federal grant dollars, most states were not awarded grants; a total of 47 states applied for grants and only 19 states received awards ranging from \$75 to \$400 million (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). As part of its funding rubric and criteria, RttT included an entire subsection that awarded up to 40 points to applicants for “Ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 11). In this regard, RttT gave states financial incentives to facilitate the growth and expansion of charter and other choice school models aimed at improving student learning and outcomes in ways traditional districts and schools had not been successful.

A 2016 study published by the Institute for Education Statistics asserts that states that received RttT funds had statistically significant differences from nonrecipient states in the number of policies “encouraging conditions in which charter schools can succeed” (Dragoset et al., 2016; p. iv). Therefore the ability for charter schools to succeed and expand became more prominent across all states—even in nonrecipient states of the RttT Grant, as these expanded policies were conditions for applying for funding.

**Common Core State Standards.** Alongside RttT, the national Common Core State Standards were developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. The national standards in English Language Arts & Literacy and Mathematics were devised as model policy for modification and adoption at the state level and would allow states to participate in one of the two national consortia established to measure student learning of Common Core standards. The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for



College and Careers (PARCC) were instituted to develop national assessments that would measure student learning according to the Common Core, and report it in a way that could inform state-to-state comparisons. (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2016). The adoption of the Common Core Standards and participation by states in either the SBAC and PARCC have been another marked shift in the ways schools and teachers are affected by external forces, as these new assessments require students to engage in more critical thinking activities and demonstration of knowledge in ways that have not been evidenced before. Since participation in state testing activities, by way of SBAC or PARCC, is a contingency of federal funding, nearly all public schools across the nation, including charter schools, have seen the shift into increasingly rigorous academic standards and assessment activities.

### **Every Student Succeeds**

In December 2015, President Barack Obama signed into law the next generation of federal education policy, the *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015* (ESSA). In 2017–2018, ESSA became the successor to NCLB, which was enacted by President Bush in 2001. Perhaps the most prominent element of the new federal education policy is the shift to greater state ownership and responsibility in many of the areas where the federal government has held a tight grip (Klein, 2016; Zarra, 2016). Broadly, ESSA focuses on student testing and accountability, funding, early-childhood education, teacher quality, and the decades-long battle with the achievement gap between students of different racial/ethnic groups (Klein, 2016). An examination of the law suggests a greater emphasis on the needs of English language learners (ELLs), which began during the era of NCLB when ELLs were considered a student subgroup whose performance on standardized tests affected the overall academic performance index (API) and annual yearly

performance (AYP) targets. While testing and accountability remains as a prominent feature of the law, the onus of responsibility to develop and monitor student performance targets has shifted from the federal U.S. Department of Education to individual states. Schools and districts that fail to meet proficiency targets will be reported to the federal government as will the improvement efforts and results.

The influence ESSA will have on school choice will not be seen for several years. States are developing their own accountability frameworks and rubrics for measuring student learning, progress, and success. Similar to NCLB, ESSA includes provisions allowing states and districts to convert failing schools to charter schools or to remove principals in an effort to improve their performance (Klein, 2016). However, despite the ways in which all schools and districts are held to the new standards and expectations for learning, charter schools are likely to be most adversely affected as they will be subject to closure if they fail to meet the new performance targets.

In California, the State Board of Education has made revisions and modifications to its Local Control & Accountability Plans (LCAP), which are the state-required plans developed by schools to indicate their performance and progress across eight state priority areas that align with federal education activities as well. Across the state, charter school performance is closely monitored by the authorizers who grant schools their charter, and a school's inability to meet its learning targets will be subject to a series of interventions that can ultimately result in the closure of a school that does not demonstrate adequate student achievement and learning. As such, charter schools often face greater pressures to succeed and present evidence of student learning and achievement, as their continued operation depends on it.

## **Privatization and Neoliberalism in Education**

The political climate in the years after *A Nation at Risk* pressed districts and schools to seek more cost-effective ways of operating and delivering services to schools and students. Chubb and Moe (1990) advocated for greater privatization in education as a way for increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of operations in school districts. Russo, Sandridge, Shapiro and Harris (1995) discussed the ways in which privatization first entered the educational arena in the mid-1980s. Business guru Peter Drucker first coined the term *privatization* in 1968, and it was appropriated for the context of education to signify “the practice of public school districts entering into contracts with private, for-profit organizations to deliver a variety of goods and services” (Russo et al., 1995, p. 127). In this sense, privatization is primarily about goods and services and ways that districts can maximize their financial resources (Russo et al., 1995).

In the decades since 1968, privatization in education has come to include the emergence of external contracting of formerly in-house functions of schools and districts (Lipman, 2011). Functional areas such as food service, janitorial services, and financial and human resource administration have been outsourced to the lowest bidder in an effort to streamline operations and reduce cost—both of which are deeply seated corporate values. In the context of choice schools, privatization is evident in the ways many schools not only contract key functions and services but also the way corporations have established themselves as full-service providers of educational, management, and operational functions of individual and networks of schools.

The presence of economic and free-market mechanisms and ideology in education has been heavily critiqued by Bowles and Gintis (1976), Abowitz (2002), Schneider (2016). The over-reliance on economic theories, they argue, does not allow for the advancement of social

policies that aim to improve the lives of its participants. Bowles and Gintis (1976) wrote, “Our critique of the capitalist economy is simple enough: the people production process—in the workplace and in schools—is dominated by the imperatives of profit and domination rather than by human need” (p. 54). Abowitz (2002) suggested that under-regulation, profits, and antigovernment sentiments characterize the school choice movement; however she also recognizes the need for new social policies and structures that enable previously denied communities the ability to access and participate in good schools.

Neoliberalism has greatly changed the landscape of public education in the United States in very tangible and notable ways (Baltodano, 2016; Lipman, 2011). Neoliberalism emerged from the policies of Chicago School economists Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek, who informed the U.S. federal economic program of the Reagan presidency in the 1980s. The effects of their policies became evident in the ways in which financial capital became the ultimate gain, while unions and employee protections and the overall social welfare net in the country went further into decline (Baltodano, 2016).

Educational researcher, activist, and scholar Pauline Lipman (2011) wrote, “neoliberalism is an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor” (p. 6). The privatization of social goods and services, such as public schools, is a direct result of neoliberalism, which she argues disrupts social order. Neoliberalism aims to shift public schooling to align it with the capitalist goals of wealth accumulation without regard for the society it serves. Furthermore, neoliberalism has shifted the onus of responsibility for leadership in schools away from professional educators to managers who are primarily

concerned with tactics to improve effectiveness and efficiency (Lipman, 2011). Furthermore, Baltodano (2016) contended, “Neoliberalism calls for a reduced government role, increased free trade agreements, deregulation of labor laws, reduction of corporate taxes, and privatization of public institutions, particularly schools” (p. 1).

Neoliberalism has woven itself into the intersections of public policy, education policy, and economic policy and their joint effects on poor and minority communities. Lipman (2011) offered a detailed narrative of the way neoliberal policies completely changed public education in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans and in Chicago. In both these instances, the voices of the community, parents, teacher unions, and students were suppressed and denied and top-down control and administrative policies dictated the new ways schooling would be implemented in these historically Black and Latino communities. In this regard, neoliberalism also served to disenfranchise those most affected by the policy agenda being advanced.

Despite the many calls to reinvigorate public schooling in America and eliminate choice schools, the legacy and presence of school choice is unlikely to decrease in the foreseeable future. Research and scholarship both in favor of and opposition to the school choice movement continues being produced annually in the United States and abroad. Whether the pendulum of educational policy will facilitate the expansion and growth of choice schools or ultimately revert schooling back to historical models is yet to be seen. The ramifications and long-term effects of the Every Student Succeeds Act will be unknown for several years yet, particularly given the highly contentious presidential election of 2016, and the subsequent appointment of educational voucher advocate Betsy DeVos as the U.S. Secretary of Education.

Neoliberalism and privatization are key ideologies that must be named for the ways in which their ideals have permeated the public education arena. It is notable that economist Milton Friedman, who had a major influence over Reagan-era economic policies, also conceived and argued for the expansion of voucher programs. The findings of *A Nation at Risk* furthered the ideals of dismantling the social enterprise of public education. Since this study examined school choice, this discussion on neoliberalism is salient as it underlies choice schools, particularly charter schools.

The following section of this chapter delves into the history of school choice and discusses several school choice models. It also offers a detailed overview of the two prominent school choice options—charter schools and voucher programs. The section concludes by discussing the ways school can be re-envisioned and reclaimed to be a tool for social justice.

### **The Concept of School Choice**

The modern school choice movement was initially conceived by Milton Friedman—a hardline conservative, free-market capitalism advocate—over 60 years ago, who advocated for school vouchers. Since then, the concept of school choice has been a tool for dismantling public education. School choice programs and options have been denounced as undermining the fabric of American democracy (Schneider, 2016). To those who identify as progressive liberals, public institutions require publicly elected leadership and accountability to the public, and therefore choice schools that do not adhere to these structures are suspect and seen as advocates for the privatization of education. Public schools have been the primary method of socialization for children and the entire nation, where students learn the values of citizenship and democracy. Baltodano (2012) and Schneider (2016) indicated that the public schooling system was intended

to focus on the development of students who are critical thinkers and who have the capacity to care for themselves and others.

Interest in different educational models and structures comes from the underlying frustration of parents, legislators, and the general public with the current educational system (Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, & Booker, 2001). While most choice programs and options emerged within the last two decades, the concept of school choice has a longer history. Equally passionate arguments in support of and in opposition to school choice have emerged in both scholarship and policy (Fowler, 2002). At its simplest level of analysis, school choice is about “how students should be assigned to schools and which schools should receive public funding” (Fowler, 2002, p. 4).

### **The Genesis of School Choice**

The initial concept of school choice emerged several decades ago and was pioneered by American economist Milton Friedman. The University of Chicago scholar first wrote about school choice as a way that families would be able to use their share of tax dollars to provide their children with an education at institutions other than the public school they were geographically assigned (Friedman, 1962). As a free-market economist, Friedman advocated for parents’ right to use their tax contributions to offset the cost of private education; essentially describing school voucher programs that have had primarily mixed results (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1992). Friedman believed voucher programs would generate a sense of urgency by schools to improve their outcomes, be able to operate more efficiently, and therefore bring about improvement to the U.S. educational system as a whole. However, his ideals were never fully realized, and across the nation, voucher programs have not had the

success Friedman hoped (Gill et al., 2001). In 1983 and again in 1985, President Reagan proposed that Congress establish and fund a federal educational voucher program that would provide poor and minority students with federal funds to offset the cost of attending a private school or a public school of their choice; both proposals failed to pass Congress (Pear, 1984).

Chubb and Moe (1988) argued for a model of school choice that would chip away at the layers of bureaucracy in the public schooling model. They argued that when comparing public and private schools, the institutional arrangements of each of these—primarily public versus private control—are the largest influence in schools’ effectiveness (Chubb & Moe, 1988). This type of organizational arrangement has placed much more significance in the control of schools and not sufficient emphasis on their outcomes, thereby rendering many schools over-bureaucratic institutions without significant regard for their efficacy or responsiveness to the needs of students and families. Nearly a decade later, Nathan (1996) wrote, “Some of public education’s troubles, clearly, come not from the problems students bring to school with them but from the educational system that unions, school boards, administrators, and legislators have created” (p. 76), suggesting that the problem of institutional control remains relevant.

For decades, school choice has been part of the national discourse in education. From Friedman in the 1950s and 1960s, to modern federal educational policies, choice has been touted as a way of improving the quality of education and the quality of educational outcomes for students at the local, state, and federal levels (Gill et al., 2001). The variety of schooling choices available within the U.S. context has grown significantly across the decades. These choices have ranged from public to private, religious to secular, and hybrid combinations of these. In the following section are descriptions for the two most widely recognized school choice programs



found today—voucher programs and charter schools. Since charter schools form the primary lens of analysis of this study, that subsection contains a more in-depth account of their history and function.

**Voucher Programs.** School voucher programs were initially conceptualized by Friedman (1955, 1962) in his early writings on school choice (Fowler, 2002). By providing families access to the tax dollars they contributed to the public education system and transferring them to other public or private schools, families would be able to make a choice that better matched their values and preferences (Fowler, 2002). School voucher programs allow families to select private schools for their children, and use their tax contributions that would typically fund public schools to subsidize the cost of the private school (Metcalf & Legan, 2002). The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of voucher programs in 2002 and, as of 2012, a total of 10 states had voucher programs (Kafer, 2012).

Sociologist Christopher Jencks (1966) advocated for school vouchers, but approached them from a different political orientation than Friedman. He argued for school vouchers for urban students because he felt schools were not inspiring or engaging for urban youth and believed families could exercise choice and take their vouchers to a school where their children's needs and interests could be met (Jencks, 1966). Despite its potential to disrupt the segregated public education system of the time, this approach did not have any lasting results or effects on the education of urban youth.

Even with the long history of voucher programs, successful models have not emerged and voucher program results have been mixed and menial at best (Carnegie Foundation for the

Advancement of Teaching, 1992). The following section describes in greater detail the more popular school choice model, charter schools.

**Charter schools.** In the mid-1970s, Ray Budde's writings for the Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands first considered what would become known as charter schools. Budde was a former classroom teacher, school principal and during his tenure as a faculty member of educational administration at the University of Massachusetts, he wrote a about a re-envisioned school district. His model suggested a move from the traditional hierarchical school district model to a new approach that offered teachers the opportunity to lead, innovate, and change the way education was occurring in schools all across the nation. He proposed districts empower teams of teachers to develop and implement innovative schools that would have minimal interference from district administrators as a way of testing new models of schooling (Budde, 1988). He discussed a new way of thinking about public schooling that placed teachers at the center of the educational experience and offered them a greater degree of autonomy to experiment with best practices to meet the needs of students. Free from district control and interference, teachers would be able to re-envision the instructional approaches and models and place student learning and achievement at the center of their practice. While innovative, his ideas remained relatively unknown until Al Shanker brought them to national prominence in the late 1980s (Medler, 2004).

Although best known for his role as president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Al Shanker was an early proponent of charter schools and is known for his role in helping spark the movement that led to the creation of the Minnesota Charter School Act of 1992 (Nathan, 1996). In a 1988 National Press Club speech, Shanker detailed the need for groups of

teachers to consider different types of ideas about schooling and devise a plan to “set up a school within that school which ultimately...would be a totally autonomous school within that district” (p. 12). His thoughts about these schools-within-schools served as the seedling that eventually germinated into the charter school movement and the legislation that allowed for charter schools in many states. The term *charter* came from the parallel Shaker drew of explorers in the Old World being granted “charters” to go explore the world in search of new lands and resources (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014).

His speech detailed the many flaws of the then–present day education system in the country that focused on obedience, listening, memorization, and standardization of processes and outcomes. Additionally, he spoke about

trying to build something that will be different, that will be effective for more than the 10 or 15 or 20 percent of students who have been able to learn throughout history . . . reach that 80% who have not been reached in the past. (Shanker, 1988, p. 9)

This experimental nature of a school was the main focus of his vision for charter schools. He believed the laboratory function of charter schools was to be coupled with the transfer of these best practices with district schools so that all students would benefit from this new learning, not just charter school students.

Beyond the need for increasing the scope of student learning and education, Shanker’s vision for charter schools included two additional features: (a) increased teacher voice and participation in decision-making processes and (b) ensuring that schools were intentionally integrated and that students of diverse racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds were being educated alongside their peers (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014). He envisioned charter schools as

places where teachers had a greater amount of autonomy and voice in their profession and in shaping the way teaching and learning occurred in their schools. His proposal, and in fact many state charter laws, provided for groups of teachers, parents, and community members to come together and establish school plans that would detail how they would educate students in different ways. This same sentiment was expressed by Minnesota State senator Ember Reichgott (later Reichgott Junge) who authored the nation’s first charter school legislation. She remarked “chartering was about empowering teachers—giving them the authority to take leadership as professionals by spearheading and forming new chartered schools...it was an option to break from the system and try something new” (Junge, 2012, p 113).

Finn, Manno, and Wright (2016) conducted a review of the laws that permit the establishment and operation of charter schools in 41 states. In their review, they found common language in the laws of 32 states, which focus on “improving achievement for all students” (Finn et al., 2016, p. 18). While the spirit and intent of charter school law is evident, there are no other common statements found in the enacted charter school laws. This lack of consistent language has resulted in the disparate understanding of charter schools across the nation. These uneven understandings of charter schools are influenced by social, financial, political, and geographic forces that contribute to the narrative of charter schools and their role in the education landscape.

While the number of students enrolled in traditional public schools is vastly larger than students in private and charter schools combined, the need for high quality school choices for students and families remains. Although the number of students enrolling in charter schools has grown over the past 10 years, a significant number of students are unable to access charter

schools due to location, availability of charter options, or availability of openings at existing schools (Nathan, 1996). These factors access to charter school options for many families

*Types of charter schools.* Attempting to find a single definition for charter schools brings in a multitude of elements and different interpretations, meanings, and assumptions, each of which vary according to their author and their individual perspective and affiliation. Researching charter school policy and law brings in an additional layer of complexity as each state has enacted its own laws, which define and set the parameters of operation. This study relies on an operational definition that states, charter schools are public choice schools operated outside the control of a school district, with greater degrees of autonomy than district-operated schools, and with increased responsibility and accountability for student learning and achievement (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1992; Murphy & Shiffman, 2002; Nathan, 1996). Some of the major distinguishing characteristics between charter and traditional public schools include the exemption from specific state laws and regulations, decisions and control of schools budgets, and the ability for a charter school to be closed if it fails to achieve its intended goals and outcomes as outlined in its charter (Nathan, 1996). Charter schools

attempt to promote widespread improvement in public education both by allowing people to create new kinds of schools and by encouraging existing school systems to improve . . . seek to change the basic ways public education is offered in this country. (Nathan, 1996, p. 18)

This description of charter schools can also be attributed to the overall charter school movement, which helps inform the broad-based approach to the way charter schools were conceptualized, how they emerged, and how they operate. This operational definition, however, is based on the

extant scholarship and laws guiding charter schools and supposes that all charter schools are established and operated to ensure compliance with all elements of law.

Charter schools can be categorized into one of three major organizational models: independent charter schools, charter management organization (CMO) operated charter schools, and educational management organization (EMO) operated charter schools. While each of these models is currently in existence, it is important to emphasize the quality of a charter school is as varied as their educational offerings and programs and a single model or approach has not been found to be the best in educating all students. Just like traditional public schools, the quality of a charter school is contingent on a myriad of internal and external factors, each of which directly impacts the school's quality and success. A more detailed description of each organizational model is presented below.

Independent charter schools are established by local non-profit, public-benefit corporations that typically operate a single or small number of campuses. The founders of independent charter schools are usually teachers, parents, and community activists and members. As a group of individuals with a common purpose, they each seek an alternative environment from that available in their local school and district. Independent charter schools are also referred to as a "mom and pop" charter schools, and are chiefly concerned with the learning of its students, the caliber and quality of its educational program, and ensuring that the needs of its teachers, parents, and local community are met (Perry, 1998). Analyzing the historical ideas and writings about charter schools, Budde (1988) most closely described this type of organizational model of charter school that focused on students, the community, teachers, and learning.

Independent charter schools are established with the intent of providing students and families an educational option not typically found in their current school or district; this includes diverse educational programs and models, different instructional methodologies and pedagogies, or specific foci and emphases not always found in the traditional public school model. These may be schools with a focus on environmental education, fine or performing arts, science, technology, engineering and math, or models of inclusive education where students with learning needs and challenges are offered the specialized academic and socioemotional support for their learning alongside their peers (Barr & Parrett, 1997; Downing, Spencer, & Cavallaro, 2004; Perry, 1998). A majority of the charter schools attended by the participants of this study are considered independent charter schools as they are not part of a larger network of schools as described by the other organizational models.

Charter management organizations (CMO) are non-profit corporations established to operate and oversee charter schools within a common organizational structure (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). This model of schools typically has a headquarter office where various administrative functions and operations are conducted all in support of the individual school campuses. For many CMO-operated schools, the consistency in their approach and program is evident across the different campuses as they function as one single organization and have a leadership structure that ensures the educational program is implemented at the individual campus level. As the charter movement has matured, CMOs have evolved to model traditional districts with central offices, bureaucracies, and layers of managers intended to oversee operations across multiple schools and locations. CMO-operated charter schools have received significant philanthropic support in recent years because of the belief that an economies of scale

and growth approach will result in greater impact and benefit to the students and communities being served (Furgeson et al., 2012).

Educational management organizations (EMO) are for-profit organizations that operate as contractors and provide education-related services to organizations and institutions, including but not limited to, charter schools (Bulkley & Fisler, 2002; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). This distinction is paramount to the ways in which the public understands charter schools, as not all entities are organized or operate in the same manner. As a for-profit entity, they have external shareholders and profit margins to maintain, and therefore offer educational services and programs that differ vastly from other charter schools. Furthermore, charter schools can contract some or all functions of their operations with an EMO rather than developing and maintaining capacity to operate all fiscal, human resource, educational, and other aspects of a school. EMOs therefore, are businesses created to provide a service and receive payment from clients for their services.

Twenty-five years after charter schools came to be, the outcomes and effects of charter schools on student achievement continue to generate varied results, suggesting that charter schools are not the magical fix once thought they could be. The diversity of charter schools prevents the identification of a single characteristic impacting student achievement (Zimmer et al., 2009). Without a common characteristic, the effects of charter schools cannot be adequately quantified and replicated. These findings are corroborated by the 2012 National Study of Charter Management Organization (CMO) Effectiveness Study, which found “there is no consensus about whether, on average, charter schools are doing better or worse than conventional public schools at promoting the achievement of their students” (Furgeson et al., 2012, p. xxi).



Another contributing factor to the uneven performance of charter schools is the “widespread misunderstanding as to what they are and how they work” (Finn et al., 2016, p. 1). Although often touted as solutions to bad traditional public schools in low-income and communities of color, charter schools are also missing the opportunity to truly revamp and re-envision education by allowing for success to be measured beyond standardized test scores and traditional notions of student performance and achievement (Finn et al., 2016). The discourse of success surrounding charter schools is measured nearly exclusively on students’ performance on standardized test scores, which is one of various success indicators. The potential for reforming the public education system served as the impetus for establishing charter schools. However little evidence exists to support this outcome, as indicated by a multitude of studies that found charter school student performance was not significantly better than that of students enrolled in traditional neighborhood schools (Betts & Tang, 2011; Winters, 2012; Zimmer et al., 2012). In some urban areas, however, charter schools have been found to have a greater effect on student achievement and outcome on standardized assessments at two-to-one rate in comparison to traditional district schools (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2015). Overall, however, conclusive evidence to support the claim that charter schools are better for students than traditional public schools does not exist.

The literature supporting and opposing charter schools and its effects on student outcomes and achievement informs the way charter schools are conceptualized and discussed in the popular media and narratives. Several successful and highly sought after charter schools in the Los Angeles area are highlighted in a recent book by Scollo, Stevens, and Pomella (2015). These models were selected for their innovative approaches in instructional methodologies,

metrics of success, and governance structures. Each of these schools is successful along several common metrics—student retention and demand for enrollment, student performance on standardized tests, organizational longevity, and teacher satisfaction and retention. In all the cases presented, these areas were highlighted and discussed as seminal in the success of the organizations and go beyond the traditional measure of a quality school that places greatest emphasis on student test scores.

While school success and quality can have myriad connotations, the quality and caliber of a school is to be considered from various vantage points—parents, teachers/employees, and school authorizers. Each of these stakeholders has differing opinions on what constitutes a good-quality school and accesses a variety of information to make a determination of school quality. Parents rely on test scores, marketing materials, and other parent recommendations to formulate an understanding of school quality (Villavicencio, 2013). A parent’s understanding of school quality, however, is also deeply informed by his or her own educational attainment and understandings, as these serve as points of reference. Educators employed at a school determine quality using different measures. For some, school quality is determined through the access to professional development and curricular autonomy (Mallory & Wohlstetter, 2003). For charter school authorizers, the quality of a school takes into account different metrics and indicators. These are used to determine school quality and inform their process for renewal or nonrenewal of a school’s charter that are set by legislation. This includes a variety of factors from student academic performance and attainment, to financial stability of an institution (Finn et al., 2016). In California, the quality of a charter school is evaluated by the authorizing body using criteria specified by the California Education Code section 47605 that includes student performance

metrics, financial health of an organization, and progress toward meeting the institution's published goals and objectives.

These perspectives highlight the complexity of defining a good school. For this study, an operational definition a good school is one that places the academic and socioemotional needs of students at the forefront of their education, and balances these with an environment in which teachers exercise their professional judgement and focus on the teaching and learning process, and school leaders create a welcoming and inclusive campus community where parents are partners in their child's education (Downing, Spencer, & Cavallaro, 2004; Mallory & Wohlstetter, 2003; Perez Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005). This aspirational definition could be applied to both traditional public schools and charter schools as these are elements that are not exclusive to a specific school segment

**Charter schools in California.** In California, charter schools came into the spotlight in 1992 with the passage of Senate Bill 1448, which authorized the creation of charter schools in California (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2006). The original law enumerated the quantity of charter schools that could be operated across the state, and limited the number that could exist within a district (Wells, 1999). Within the first 5 years of enactment, the law was revised and updated to remove the annual caps and district limits established, thereby allowing for growth of charter schools across the state. California charter law also established provisions for the oversight and monitoring functions of charter school authorizers, indicated required elements of a school charter, and provided authorizers with criteria for approval and denial of charters (Wells, 1999). Since being enacted in 1992, California has established 1,869 charter schools across the state; 1,243 are currently active, 472 have been closed, and an additional eight schools

are in various steps in the process of opening (California Department of Education, 2016a). In the Los Angeles area, the school landscape is dotted with independent charter schools and charter schools operated by CMOs, and EMOs. This yields a multitude of schools that offer students and families a variety of educational opportunities and options. In dissecting data files published by the California Department of Education (2017), approximately 172 of the 346 charter schools in the County of Los Angeles are operated by CMOs. Further analysis and mapping finds charter schools are concentrated in Latina/o, Black, and low-income communities across the region. The rationale for establishing a charter school in a particular area is primarily dependent on the organization's mission and target population it aims to serve. In many instances, charter schools are established in areas where the current schools have been unable to provide students and families a quality educational experience. Poor performance of a traditional district school or schools in a neighborhood is a data point presented by charter schools when seeking to establish a charter school in a particular area. Given the prevalence and preference of quantitative data as an indicator of school quality, these data are used as an argument for opening charter schools in areas and communities where the traditional public school has not been able to successfully support students in achieving high marks on standardized assessments and measures.

While charter schools also operate outside of poor, Black, and Latina/o communities, an overwhelming majority is concentrated in areas where the traditional district schools have been chronically underperforming. In this discussion about the role of charter schools and traditional public schools, absent is a discussion about what happens when both the traditional public school and the available charter schools are of poor quality. As indicated in the prior section, school quality is comprised of various quantitative and qualitative metrics. However, one standard

indicator of school quality is school performance on standardized tests that are required at all traditional public schools and charter schools. What, then, are the options a family has when neither of the available choices is deemed of quality? This presents a moral and ethical dilemma to educators in schools and to parents who are making efforts to provide their children a quality education. In this regard, does choice truly exist when neither of the choices is desirable?

The genesis of charter schools was to provide alternative educational settings and opportunities for parents, students, and teachers (Budde, 1998; Shanker, 1988). Although schools across the country have heeded this call, charter management organizations have evolved and now mimic the traditional district central office that oversees and controls schools. The organizational bureaucracy and hierarchy indicative of traditional district offices, and which has been a major critique of the public school system, is slowly evolving and showing itself in charter management organizations (Finn et al., 2016). This leads to speculation of what the charter school landscape in Los Angeles may look like in 20 years if most of the educational institutions in the region are operated by overly bureaucratic organizations. Al Shanker (1988) proposed charters as a model that would free teachers and other educators from the bureaucracy of the traditional district, however this objective of charter schools is glaringly absent from many charter organizations, which more closely resemble the traditional district model than the centers of innovation charter schools were intended to be.

### **Reclaiming School Choice for Social Justice**

While extensive support and research for choice schools and programs has been published over the past 30 years, equally fervent opposition has also denounced the sociopolitical

foundations and underpinnings of the school choice movement. This section offers a counter-argument of how charter schools can be reclaimed and re-envisioned as a tool for social justice.

While educators and scholars attempt to dismantle the effects of neoliberalism and privatization in public education, arguments for school choice as a tool for social justice have also appeared in the literature. Rofes and Stulberg (2004) compiled an anthology on the ways charter schools can be re-envisioned as tools for social justice. A diverse group of authors offered an in-depth account of many successful charter organizations across the country that have taken to heart the call to provide all families and students a quality public education within their communities. The authors advocated for charter schools to be revisited and reexamined for their merit and potential for disrupting the groupthink status quo on school choice.

Economist, educational sociologist, and coauthor of *Schooling in Capitalist America* (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), Herbert Gintis wrote a compelling argument for the need to rethink school choice—particularly charter schools. Along with Samuel Bowles, they denounced school choice for its free-market capitalist ideologies and the ways in which teaching would be stripped of its professional identity. However, in his foreword for Rofes and Stulberg's (2004) *The Emancipatory Promise of Charter Schools*, Gintis went back on his original position and discusses the important role charter schools can play in advancing the educational attainment of minority students. He posited that opposition to charter schools is primarily from those who have sided with teacher unions and believed in workers' rights and had taken sides with the adults and not the students, who should be the centerpiece of any educational institution. Additionally, he dispelled various misconceptions and fears about charter schools including a deficiency in parents to adequately make choices for their children, the loss of per-pupil funding when

students do not attend district schools, and lower-than-anticipated performance by students in charter schools.

Although the debate between the various politically aligned factions supporting and opposing charter schools continues to frame discourses on the topic, an often missing voice is that of individual educators. King (2004) detailed a project that brought together the voices of charter school educators from across the country to detail their motivations, aspirations, challenges, and success within their respective organizations. The diversity of their institutions, state regulations, and experiences as teachers, leaders, and founders provides an important perspective from these individuals who are intimately involved in the day-to-day education on their respective school sites. While not unanimous in their feelings for charter schools, they share a desire to “provide a quality education for students who are traditionally underserved” (King, 2004, p. 160) and the possibility of re-envisioning education within their respective communities. Additionally, the participants discussed their individual drive as social justice educators to operate outside of dysfunctional and restrictive district models that stifle creativity and innovation and work in nontraditional spaces and environments aimed at serving students and not the interests of adults or teacher unions (King, 2004).

Beyond providing educational opportunities to families and students, charter schools have been successful in creating and nurturing community (Finn et al., 2000). The authors detailed the way in which charter schools build community as “self-governing, mission-driven institutions that guide decisions, practices, personnel and budget priorities” (Finn et al., 2000, p. 249). They argued that charter schools also provide “professional communities for teachers and educators” (p. 252), and “intimacy, scale, and involvement” (Finn et al., 2000, p. 251). These

characteristics are not endemic or unique to charter schools, however they are key indicators to the way charter schools are changing the landscape of public education in the United States.

The arguments in favor of and in opposition of charter schools are widely found in the scholarship, literature, and popular media. The dichotomous nature of author positions accurately encapsulates the nature with which opponents and proponents vigorously debate public and charter schools in a zero sum manner. Research favoring charter schools seldom acknowledges the arguments against them, and conversely, scholarship against charters does not detail the diversity and distinctions among charter schools and often vilifies all charter schools without regard to the many schools that do not fall into broad generalizations. Medler (2014) posited this dichotomy is approached as charter schools being complementary to district schools or in competition with district schools. Beyond naming the two schools of thought on charter school, he discussed that the purpose of charter schools varies based primarily on political inclinations and ideologies.

Rofes (2004) presented a critical analysis of charter schools and the ways in which they can be spaces of resistance or spaces that reproduce social inequality. Guided by Bourdieu and Passeron's writings on schooling and social reproduction, he discussed charter schools as institutions that can serve to maintain current social inequities through their implicit methods and curricula, or as potentially emancipatory spaces that honor the cultural capital of families and students. By working with their own capital, Rofes (2004) argued that emancipatory schools can help students and families understand and negotiate with elite forms of capital that exist in mainstream social structures. These emancipatory spaces, he posited, "require a Freirean focus on praxis and critical consciousness, a sense of Fanon's pedagogy of resistance" (Rofes, 2004, p.



258) and an inclination for Giroux's critical pedagogy (Rofes, 2004). In this manner, charter schools can be emancipatory spaces that appeal to communities of color that are seeking alternatives to the White dominated educational structures and "offer the opportunity to interrupt entrenched patterns of social reproduction" (Rofes, 2004, p. 260).

The terms *charter schools* and *social justice* appear to be mutually exclusive and incompatible. The sociopolitical foundations of school choice espoused by Friedman go against the Freirean values of praxis, consciousness, and resistance. It is important to also highlight the origin of charter schools is traced to Al Shanker, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, who set the charge to try something new and innovative that would result in better educational opportunities and outcomes for a greater number of students. While Shanker's initial thoughts and ideas were taken, changed, and became the charter school movement, the ethos of educating students remains at the core of this discourse.

A significant element of charter schools that merits brief discussion in the context of social justice is the role of teacher unions in charter schools. Teacher unions have played a primary role in the current public education arena (Weitzel & Lubienski, 2010). Although Al Shanker served as president of the largest teacher union in the nation, unionized teachers were the ones who were conceptualizing and operating the charter schools he described. Lipman (2011) and Baltodano (2016) contended that the decreasing role of unions, employee protections, and the broader social safety net is a cause for grave concern and caution against the growing focus on privatization, profits, and corporate interests—particularly in education. Teacher unionization and charter schools are not mutually exclusive as unionizing efforts in charter schools have been successful; however this is more of an anomaly than a trend or commonality

(Weitzel & Lubienski, 2010). As a whole, charter schools are not unionized environments and therefore seen as a threat to the current status quo of the educational landscape; the motivations and causes describing why more charter schools are not unionized is varied and speculated to be a function of the school leadership's perspective on the bureaucracy that accompanies unionization (Montaño, 2012).

The following section of this literature review focuses on the subjects of this study, Latina/o individuals, and details the historical and current state of education of Latina/o students in the United States.

### **Latina/o Education in the United States**

Latina/o's in the United States have a rich history spanning centuries before the arrival of European colonizers, particularly in the Southwest which was acquired in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 (Carrasco, 1998; MacDonald, 2004). Shortly thereafter, immigration to the United States by Mexicans spurred as the Gold Rush demanded greater access to labor in California. The *Braceros* program of the 1920s provided jobs to immigrants who were willing to work the farmlands during World War I, but were abruptly unwelcomed as the Great Depression took hold of the nation (Carrasco, 1998). These patterns of ebbs and flows of immigration illustrate the bipolar nature of immigration practices and policies in the United States, which has ultimately resulted in a primarily immigrant nation. Individuals from minority racial or ethnic groups are estimated to become the majority of the U.S. population by the year 2044 (Colby & Ortman, 2014).

The participation of Latina/o students in American education has oftentimes been exclusionary and seldom welcoming. Until 1947, it was lawful for Mexican students to be

educated in second-class schools segregated from White students in California. The *Mendez v. Westminster* decision declared this unconstitutional, and provided legal precedent for the landmark *Brown v. Board* case of 1954 (MacDonald, 2004). While the *Mendez v. Westminster* case nears 70 years since its decision, the condition of Latina/o student education in the United States oftentimes still mirrors what was fought against by the Mendez family. Even in contemporary educational settings, Latina/o students lag behind their White and African American peers in terms of attainment, college graduation rates, and participation in advanced placement and honors courses (MacDonald, 2004).

The national perspective described above is not very different at the local level—in this case in the State of California. Madrid (2011) detailed how Latina/o students are concentrated in overcrowded and underfunded schools across the state. In an effort to address the conditions of California schools, a class action lawsuit was filed against the State of California and the California Department of Education and several other parties by 100 San Francisco County students for failure to provide adequate materials, qualified teachers, and safe and clean campus facilities. After several years of litigation, the *Williams vs. State of California* (2004) case settled for \$138,000,000, which was paid out by the California Department of Education to ensure minimum conditions for facilities and textbooks were available and maintained in all public schools (California Department of Education, 2016b).

The quality and caliber of teachers is indeed a significant player in determining the success and attainment of Latina/o students. In a National Education Policy Center publication, Briggs and Domingue (2011) found a relationship exists between the quality of a teacher and the attainment of students, even when controlling for other variables such as second language learner

status, prior test scores, gender, eligibility for Title I services, and kindergarten participation in the district. Their analysis was conducted to verify the findings of a 2010 article in *the Los Angeles Times* that heavily critiqued the vast difference in student achievement on standardized tests from one classroom to another even within the same school (Felch, Song, & Smith, 2010).

### **Latina/o Student Enrollment**

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) estimated that the 13.5 million Hispanic<sup>1</sup> students enrolled in U.S. public elementary and secondary schools account for 25% of the total enrolment of students in the country in the Fall of 2016. The concentration of this enrollment is in the Western United States, where Hispanic students accounted for 42% of all students (NCES, 2016). In California, the total number of students enrolled across the state exceeded 6.35 million in 2014–2015, with over half (3.34 million) of these students identified as Hispanic or Latino. Traditional district public schools enrolled approximately 53% of all Hispanic/Latino students in the state, and more than 550,000 students were enrolled in over 1,100 charter schools (Education Data Partnership, 2016). In the County of Los Angeles, where this study was focused, the K–12 student population in 2015–2016 was estimated at over 1.5 million, with Latina/o students accounting for 65% of these; approximately 350 charter schools operated in the county and enrolled over 189,000 students (Los Angeles County Office of Education, 2016).

The distribution of Latina/o students indicated that a majority enrolled in traditional public schools, and smaller segments enrolled in charter schools or private schools. For purposes

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<sup>1</sup>Hispanic is the term used in the cited publication, and therefore also used in this and other instances as found in state and/or federal government publications.

of this literature review, traditional public schools also entail magnet, pilot, and other district-based choice models.

### **How and Why Parents Choose**

The availability of, and enrollment in, school choice models is a complex puzzle involving various elements. Geography, economics, immigration, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and even political inclinations of state legislatures and local elected officials directly affect the type, number, and variety of school choices available to families (Murphy & Shiffman, 2002). In researching and exploring school choices, parents must take into account a variety of factors, including availability of no-cost options, the costs associated with private schools, and the quality of all the available choices, public or private. However, it is undeniable that “the choice process tends to work much better for those who are most advantaged economically and educationally” (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1992, p. 14).

Choosing a school for children to attend has been a facet of American public education since the 1800s, when compulsory education became law (Butler, Carr, Toma, & Zimmer, 2013). In their national study of school choices Butler et al. (2013) compared several dozen choice factors against a national data set in an attempt to identify the various elements that influenced school choice patterns. The factors they examined included the presence of a father in the home, parental education, religious affiliation, the racial composition of the school under consideration, and geographic proximity. The authors posited that one of the most prominent factors determining the selection of charter schools was family socioeconomic status.

The quality of a neighborhood school is often correlated to the socioeconomic status of the residents of a particular community. In nearly all traditional public schools, students are assigned to attend a particular school based on the geographic location of their residence. In this sense, families who are able to select the location of their residence also select the school their children will attend. This is a choice mechanism that is widely used particularly by upper and middle class families with the financial means to reside in certain areas of a city or neighborhood (Gill et al., 2001). Schneider (2016) suggested that upper and middle class parents who choose charter schools are those who seek a nontraditional experience in “an elite education” (p. 63). She described this has having a negative impact on the enrollment at traditional district schools because families are seeking an educational experience most district schools do not offer. While her assertion raised an important and truthful point, a contrary version of her statements has also emerged in the scholarship on school choice.

In a 2013 study of New York City charter school parents, Villavicencio (2013) discussed the role of social capital in informing school choice. She described the ways in which formal selection mechanisms were not always used by low income families and argued that choice sets were “determined in part by a parent’s social and economic capital . . . and thus influenced by family characteristics and not the characteristics of the schools themselves” (Villavicencio, 2013, p. 4). This study offered insight into search patterns and processes undertaken by families, which ranged from no-search criteria to extensive searches that included various applications, school tours, and conversations with teachers, parents, and principals at prospective schools. Bell (2009) gained similar insights from a longitudinal school choice study. She offered additional understanding of the ways in which several factors directly influence the options explored,

researched, and ultimately selected. The study found “poor and working class parents did not choose from schools that varied in quality, but rather selected from school that were relative uniform—failing, nonselective, and free” (Bell, 2009, p. 206).

The body of scholarship surrounding school choice for poor and working class families stands in stark contrast to most literature on school choice, which describes selection criteria, extensive searches, and a multitude of considerations, ultimately resulting in a choice among schools of similar quality and caliber. Bell (2009) and Villavicencio (2013) both suggested these traditional search patterns are not typical among poor and working class individuals.

The reasons Latina/o families select schools are as diverse as the community itself. Economics, geography, convenience, location, familiarity, and myriad other factors influenced the ultimate selection of a school (Martinez, Godwin, & Kemerer, 1996; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016). The purpose of this study was to learn the factors that immigrant Latina/o families considered when selecting a school for their children. Although very limited, some current research detailing the ways in which Latina/o families choose schools is detailed in the following section.

Mavrogordato and Stein (2016) studied the way Latino families selected a charter school for their children in urban Indianapolis and found “different resources, skills, social connections, and cultural contexts” (p. 1035) created barriers that influenced the way Latino parents selected schools. They found that parents primarily relied on their social networks to access information about schools and oftentimes made decisions based solely on those sources. Several participants made their choice when they were able to discuss the choice school with a friend, neighbor, or the parent of a child who was already attending the school. Some parents in their study indicated

they completely opted not to explore traditional district schools based on their perceptions and or reputations of the schools. Another selection criterion for their participants was the location of the school they chose, as transportation and logistics were important factors to consider, particularly because the choice schools did not offer transportation. Similar selection factors were also found by Lee, Croninger, and Smith (1996) in their study of school choice among African American families in urban Detroit.

In another study of Latino parents and their selection of magnet schools, Haynes et al. (2010) found several characteristics greatly influenced school selection patterns—educational attainment level of the parent, family income, academic focus and priorities, and convenience (i.e., transportation and location). Their study of school choice was located in Nashville, Tennessee, and focused on the Latino population that has been emerging in that region over the past decade. The researchers hypothesized that Latinos with higher education levels, higher income levels, and those whose immigration status was first-generation and beyond were more likely to select a choice school for their children. However, they found these factors played out differently for Latinos than for Black or White parents. The choosers (parents who enrolled in choice schools) had either high or low educational attainment levels in comparison with their Black and White counterparts. This finding is different from most other research, which has found that greater parental educational attainment is related to the likelihood of selecting a choice school. Similar to the findings of Mavrogordato and Stein (2016), Haynes et al. (2010) found that social networks played an important role in acquiring information about choice schools, particularly for recent immigrants who relied on networks for resources.



In a publication examining the enrollment of English Language Learners (ELLs) in charter schools, Garcia and Morales (2016) found that the availability of information about charter schools was a barrier for families. The lack of information about the purposes of charter schools, the ways in which they functioned, and that they were tuition-free schools were elements which influenced the enrollment trends and patterns of ELL students. A variety of outreach and recruitment approaches were examined for efficacy and determined the best method of sharing information was via individual contacts between school officials and community organizations and parents.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

The scholarship and research available on the salient topics of this dissertation abound. In this examination of the literature, the voices of parents were relatively silent on the majority of the discourse surrounding school choice. While the policy and practice implications from an academic scholarship perspective are important, the limited presence of parent voice in most of the literature is indicative of the way lived experiences are not always sought, valued, or made available. The silenced voices of Latina/o and immigrant individuals are particularly important to note, as they are indicative of the manner in which certain voices and lives are privileged and readily found in academic scholarship.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined several areas of research that are integral to understanding the topic of school choice for Latina/o families. The development of a theoretical framework grounded in socialization (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) set the foundation for understanding the diverse ways social capital and cultural capital were

present for Latina/o individuals. Cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1976) and social capital (Coleman, 1988) were found present in the literature of school choice, however re-interpretations of capital for Latina/o individuals were essential to this study. The nuanced understanding of capital for Latina/o individuals of the theoretical framework served to make meaning of the lived experiences of Latina/o individuals who were absent from historical understandings of social capital (Coleman, 1988) and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1976).

The storied nature of American educational policy provides context to the landscape of public education in the country. The myriad programs, policies, and initiatives have heavily influenced the way in which public education is conceived, understood, and discussed by families, legislators, and other stakeholders. These policies have allowed for the tremendous growth of charter schools, which are now found in nearly all states across the nation. While diverse in approach, charter schools have diverse organizational models and structures, which are counter to the traditional model of public schools that has been in existence for over 100 years (Schneider, 2016). The participation of Latina/o individuals in the educational system is rooted in a system that provided separate and unequal opportunities for learning; quite similar to the experience of African Americans.

Despite growth in participation and attainment, Latina/o students are oftentimes geographically bound to schools in neighborhoods where poverty, crime, and immigration converge. In many of these neighborhoods, charter schools have been established as tuition-free, public school choices that offer families an alternative to their district-operated schools. Despite their prevalence in many communities, knowledge about charter schools and their functions prevents them from being accessed by the families they aim to serve. Compounding this

dilemma, is the disparate quality of the available school choices—both traditional public schools and charter schools.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

People are always tellers of tales. They live surrounded by their stories and the stories of others; they see everything that happens to them through those stories and they try to live their lives as if they were recounting them.

Sartre, 1964, as cited in Bruner, 2003

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) indicated that qualitative research is focused on interpreting phenomena in their natural elements and in the meaning making process. Flick (2014) suggested qualitative research has the aim of discovery and exploration into new realms of knowledge and understanding rather than testing the truth of extant theories through the scientific method. Guided by the principle of expanding understanding, this study used a qualitative research methodology to understand the school selection process by immigrant Latina/o parents.

As a methodology, qualitative research allows for the development and creation of knowledge, understandings, descriptions, and stories (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Flick, 2014). This study utilized a narrative inquiry approach to learn from participants about their lived experience, and the ways in which they make sense and meaning of their experience (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to understand what factors immigrant Latina/o families considered when researching and selecting a charter school for their children, to understand how immigrant Latina/o families made meaning of the U.S. educational system, and to learn what immigrant Latina/o families considered characteristics of good schools, teachers, and education as a whole. These interconnected purpose statements were intentionally designed as building blocks to more deeply understand this complex topic.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study were:

Why and how do immigrant Latina/o parents in the greater Los Angeles area research and apply to charter schools?

What are the factors they consider in their decision making process?

These research questions explored the ways in which the U.S. educational system is understood, and how this understanding is used in the research and selection process of charter schools for their children. These questions generated data that detailed participants' understanding of the education system and the various factors utilized by parents in the school research and selection process. The examination of these factors are set within the context of school choice and the manner in which parents make sense and understand the growing prevalence of choice schools in their neighborhoods and communities.

## **Selection of Methodology**

A qualitative research methodology was used in this study to best understand the factors families use to research and select a school for their children. It relied on words to explain phenomena that occurred and required narratives be framed by time, space, and local situations (Flick, 2014). While quantitative methods have been used in research about school choice (Butler et al., 2013), they overlook the complexity of significance that is central to qualitative research (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

The lived experiences of Latina/o students and families are oftentimes only minimally noted; thus the researcher selected a narrative approach to this study to bring voice to those absent in the research and scholarship. The narrative approach to this study enabled study

participants to share perspectives, thoughts, and beliefs in their native language, which was not found in the scholarship on school choice.

By nature, qualitative research is affected by a researcher's "history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 3) and therefore is a part of the research. As a researcher, the personal connection to this topic was pertinent and was revealed and cannot be denounced or removed from the research process. The educational trajectory of the researcher has greatly influenced interest in the topic of this study; the researcher had nearly a decade of professional experience as an educational administrator at a charter school attended by several participants of this study.

## **Research Design**

### **Overview**

This study aimed to understand the school research and selection process of immigrant Latina/o parents. This study was descriptive in nature and used a non-experimental design (Gay et al., 2012). A narrative inquiry approach guided the study, which allowed participants to detail their lived experiences in a manner that honored their lives, histories, and voices.

### **Research Approach**

Narrative research and inquiry traces its origin to the work of sociologists at the Chicago School, who examined and gathered life histories in the 1920s and 1930s (Chase, 2005; Clandinin, 2007). Anthropologists of the time made use of autobiographies to learn cultural facts, which allowed them to establish cultural context and gain an understanding of groups of people through individual lives. The influence of the liberation movement of the 1960s and the women's movement that followed brought a greater sense of humanity to narrative inquiry by shifting the

way this approach considered subjectivity, objectivity, authenticity, authority, and representation (Chase, 2005).

Narrative research has a philosophical alignment to postmodernism in that it acknowledges the power of individual knowing and personal knowledge (Squire et al., 2013). This research approach also provides the researcher an avenue to understand his or her own stories, attitudes, and values (Webster & Mertova, 2007). As a research approach, narrative inquiry is seen as developing, and thus an “amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods, all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them” (Chase, 2005, p. 651). According to Pinnegar and Daynes (2007), four major turning points in research history led to its development, “the attention to relationships among participants, the move to words as data, the focus on the particular, and the recognition of blurred genres of knowing” (p. 3). The narrative inquiry approach focuses on the subjects, their language, and the events, which were obtained by the researcher and used as data, history, and knowledge (Squire et al., 2013). By capturing and analyzing life stories, narrative inquiry sheds light into critical life events, which reflect the belief that experience is a part of development and growth; these insights serve as powerful reminders of the power of individual voices and stories (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

In examining the research questions of this study, they are best addressed through the voices, perspectives, beliefs, and feelings of participants. As such, the basic units of data for this study were the words that formed the story of the lives of the participants. Narrative inquiry, therefore, was the research approach used to gain insight and shape the understanding of this topic.

## **Sampling Criteria**

This study focused on the school choice process for immigrant Latina/o parents with children attending or who have attended an elementary charter school. The purpose of this study was to understand their school choice research and selection process. Therefore, the sampling criteria for participation in this study were:

1. Self-identified as Latina or Latino
2. Resident of Los Angeles County
3. Self-identified as an immigrant to the United States
4. Parent of a child attending or who has attended an elementary charter school

Purposive and nomination sampling techniques were used to identify and select participants who met the criteria described above (Gay et al., 2012). This purposive sampling approach enabled the researcher to intentionally identify and select the 13 participants who formed the data source for this qualitative study. Nomination sampling was also employed to ensure sufficient participants formed part of the study.

The qualitative methodology and narrative inquiry approach of this study suggested that 10 to 12 participants would help reach the point of data saturation, thereby indicating a representation of stories and experiences that help formulate the basis of the study's findings (Gay et al., 2012). A total of 13 participants formed part of this study.

## **Participants**

To best answer the research questions and to generate sufficient data to understand this topic, 10 to 12 parents were sought to participate in this study. The participants of this study were likely to be primarily Latina mothers who are or have been the primarily involved parent in



the education of their children. Participant age range was anticipated to be between 25 and 50 as some participants may have children of varying ages both currently and formerly enrolled in charter schools.

### **Access**

As a resident in a community of immigrants and first-generation Latina/o individuals, the researcher intended to solicit participants to this study from the local neighborhood. The researcher's personal relationships with members of the community offered a varied perspective on the topic. Additional participants for this study were also solicited from within the parent community of the charter school where the researcher is employed as a campus administrator. Because the research was not limited to a single site or location, access to participants was not subject to approval.

### **Research Process**

The data for this research study were collected via individual interviews conducted between September and December 2017. This timeframe allowed the researcher to spend a substantial amount of time with participants, engaging in conversations and conducting the interviews and having follow-up conversations as necessary. Since the study was only bound by the geography of the county of Los Angeles, the study did not have a particular site or setting; participants were selected based solely on the sampling criteria detailed above and their willingness to participate in the study.

### **Data Collection**

As a qualitative methodology, narrative inquiry is grounded in the story of the participant and the nature of each participant of this study (Chase, 2005; Fraser, 2004). As a form of

qualitative research, narratives allow for the sharing of events and processes presented to the researcher in the form of interviews or written biographies (Flick, 2014). To best gain an understanding into the topic of this study, the researcher engaged in narrative interviews (Hatch, 2002) with participants to obtain insights into their school choice process; interview transcripts were the primary data source for this study.

The data collection method for this study was face-to-face narrative interviews conducted by the researcher (Flick, 2014). Narrative interviews shifted the dynamic of interviewer-interviewee into one of narrator and listener for the purpose of obtaining a deep understanding of the story being shared and the meaning-making processes occurring during the interview (Chase, 2005; Fraser, 2004; Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). The narrative interview not only solicited particular moments of a participant's lived experiences, but also invited additional stories that provided context to their experience (Chase, 2005). Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) provided a format for the narrative interview, which consisted of five main phases: "preparation, initiation, main narration, questioning phase, and concluding talk" (p. 60). Although the research interview is formal in nature (Hatch, 2002), the narrative interview was focused on the stories participants share regarding their school research and selection process, and as such a traditional interview protocol was replaced by an interview prompt containing guiding questions. Fraser (2004) also suggested researchers "use a conversational style of interviewing [ . . . ] engaging participants in relatively friendly ways to process stories along the way" (p. 185).

The 13 interviews conducted for this study spanned from 50 minutes to 120 minutes. Because the researcher already had an existing rapport with nearly every participant, only one face-to-face interview was conducted with each participant. The interviews were conducted in a

variety of settings, including the office of the researcher on the campus where several of the participants attended the charter school, as well as the home of several other participants.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this study did not occur in a single instance, but rather over an extended period of time and in different ways. A line-by-line narrative analysis (Fraser, 2004) and an open-coding analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were the primary data analysis methods for this study. Fraser (2004) described seven phases of line-by-line narrative analysis that were then used in this study. Each phase offered a guide of how to conduct the data analysis, and just as importantly provided the researcher with various reflection questions pertinent to the specific phase of the analysis.

The first step in the data analysis process is what Fraser (2004) named “Phase One: Hearing the stories, experiencing each other’s emotions” (p. 186). This phase occurs both during and after an interview has been conducted and is primarily focused on being attuned to the feelings and emotions shared through the participants’ story. This emotional understanding of a story enabled the researcher to remain present with the participant and not over-think his or her story or attempt to make meaning beyond what was being shared. A research journal is suggested as a tool to help jot ideas about emotions and feelings that emerge during and immediately after the interview.

Interview transcriptions are a form of data analysis and form the second phase of the narrative research data analysis (Fraser, 2004; Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). By transcribing the audio-recordings, the researcher gathered verbal and nonverbal cues about the participants’ stories and experiences. The greatest benefit of interview transcription is it allowed the

researcher to develop a close relationship with the participant even if he/she is not present in the moment. Of particular importance to this study is that most interviews were conducted solely in Spanish. In order to best capture the richness of the stories being shared by participants, Lopez, Figueroa, Connor, and Maliski (2008) offered guidance to ensure the reliability of the data gathered during the qualitative interview process. They suggest the use of one single translator who is familiar with both the source and target culture to capture the context and nuances of language, especially for words and phrases which do not translate directly into the target language (Lopez et al., 2008). To mitigate the effects of translation, the audio recording of interviews was transcribed into Spanish, and only later translated during the data analysis phase by the researcher who is a native Spanish speaker.

The third phase of the data analysis process was the interpretation of transcripts, which was a highly detailed and involved process that deciphered and made meaning of the story that was shared. A major challenge in this phase is the requirement of proactive listening to “hear” the start, mid-point, and end of a particular piece of the story shared by a participant. Additionally, this phase allowed for whole stories to be deconstructed by the researcher to begin numbering elements of the stories that were used in other data analysis phases. The fourth phase of data analysis explored the interactions participants have with external elements described in their stories. This understanding provided context to the social role and nature of the stories shared, and provided evidence to the researcher of the social networks and institutional agents described in the theoretical framework of this study.

The fifth phase Fraser (2004) described relates to “linking the personal with the political” (p. 193). This was discussed as the ways different stories and experiences are examined against

the common discourses and understandings of the individuals telling their stories. By comparing participant stories against other commonly understood or known stories, the researcher was able to better understand and make meaning of shared experiences.

The sixth phase of the narrative analysis (Fraser, 2004) identified commonalities and differences among participants and their stories. In this phase interview transcripts were compared and dissected to identify patterns of similarities among participants; these similarities were in context, tone, word choice and selection, or similarity of experience. Beyond identifying similarities, this phase of the analysis discovered any elements that may appear “inconsistent, counter-intuitive, surprising, and/or anomalous” (Fraser, 2004, p. 195). The final phase of narrative analysis was the writing of the narrative (Fraser, 2004). This seventh phase took the audio-recorded stories and transcriptions and generated a written narrative story of the participants’ lived story. This final phase was complex in nature as it attempted to remain authentic to the participant and factually present the story as recorded by the researcher.

To make meaning of the data, an inductive analysis (Hatch, 2002) was utilized to develop the general understandings of the factors Latina/o families considered when selecting a school for their children. The inductive analysis focused on taking the individual elements formulated in the interview transcripts, and moving toward a more general approach that generated broad themes that emerged from the data. A coding frame was developed as the data were collected and reviewed, which involved an iterative text paraphrasing process that progressively reduced the amount of text by summarizing and condensing their meaning, resulting in keywords that form a category system (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). An open coding analysis of words, phrases, and the entire transcript, while labor intensive, is the most effective method for

generating coding categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Each interview was coded individually, and the resulting categories were compiled from all interviews and reviewed for occurrence. In this manner, findings of the research were analyzed both individually by interviewee and cumulatively for the entire group of participants in the study. These steps directly corresponded to phases three and six described by Fraser (2004) in her line-by-line narrative analysis.

Once the coding categories were developed, they were analyzed through the theoretical framework of this study. This analysis helped determine whether evidence of Latina/o capital as described in the theoretical framework emerged from the participants' stories.

### **Criteria for Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1986) discussed the requirement for re-envisioning the notions of reliability and validity found in quantitative research, and devising new understandings within qualitative research. To further legitimize the rigor of qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1986) established parallels to these concepts in the following ways “credibility as analog to internal validity, transferability as an analog to external validity, dependability as an analog to reliability, and confirmability as an analog to objectivity” (pp. 76–77). This section discusses these concepts as elements that enhanced the rigor of this study.

### **Credibility**

In this study, credibility was established through prolonged engagement by the researcher with participants. Lincoln and Guba (1986) defined prolonged engagement as the “lengthy and intensive contact with the phenomena (or respondents) in the field” (p. 77). For this study, prolonged engagement was a critical factor not only in the data collection and analysis phase, but also in the sampling criteria for participants. Since participants were members of the researcher's

personal and/or professional networks, prolonged engagement was present from the onset of the study. While the interviewing phase of the study lasted three months, the acquaintance and rapport with participants spanned several years in most cases.

In addition to prolonged engagement, the credibility of this study was enhanced by data triangulation. Hatch (2002) defined triangulation as “verification or extension of information from other sources” (p. 91). In this study, the data were triangulated among 13 participants to ensure the findings and themes emerging were relatively consistent and generating salient results. In the process of triangulation, the researcher examined the themes generated in each interview transcript, and compared them for alignment.

Negative case analysis was another method that was used to enhance the credibility of this study. While the participants of the study shared characteristics, as indicated in the sampling criteria, the nature of individual lives and experiences may have resulted in themes that countered the anticipated results of the study. In this study, negative cases did not emerge, leading to the realistic nature of the study, which aimed to understand the school choice factors for Latina/o parents.

### **Transferability**

Geertz (1973) indicated the use of thick descriptions as pivotal to the understanding of phenomena within qualitative research. By providing rich, thick descriptions of the narratives obtained from this study, the researcher generated a level of transferability that Lincoln and Guba (1986) argued provides greater context to others studying the same topic. For this study, the inter-group diversity of the participants and study setting enhanced the transferability of the study.

The primary purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the school choice process for immigrant Latina/o parents in the greater Los Angeles region, and less about describing the school choice process for all parents. As such, the generalizability of this study was limited, but this was not a handicap of the study; on the contrary, it generated a rich understanding of the topic from a local perspective. The elements of the study that can be generalized include the participant criteria and the factors considered in the school choice process discovered during the research process, which can be used by other researchers for comparative purposes.

### **Dependability**

Dependability is the equivalent of reliability in quantitative studies and refers to the way a study can be replicated and generate similar results (Flick, 2014). Lincoln and Guba (1986) discussed various techniques to ensure the dependability of a qualitative study, including an audit trail, data triangulation, and researcher positionality. The description of the methods for participant selection, data collection, and data analysis served as an audit trail for other researchers seeking to examine the dependability and replicability of this study. The triangulation of data that emerged from this study serves as an additional element of dependability. The researcher's positionality is disclosed at length in the following section and is used as a way of revealing the researcher's objectivity in this study.

### **Researcher Positionality**

This study sought to understand the factors immigrant Latina/o families considered when researching and selecting a charter school for their children. In an attempt at full disclosure, this study was heavily informed through multiple identities and lenses of the researcher—as the child



of immigrants, as a participant in various school choice programs, and as an independent charter school administrator. The following narrative presents the researcher's story.

In 1984, my parents made the decision for me to attend the kindergarten program at the Little Flower School, a small early childhood education program in the Lincoln Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles. I completed grades first through eighth in their partner elementary school, Sacred Heart of Jesus, in the same neighborhood, and was slated to attend Cathedral High School just a few minutes away. However, due to our family's relocation, I attended a large, comprehensive, urban high school in Pomona, California, instead. After graduating high school, I went on to earn an undergraduate degree from the California State Polytechnic University, Pomona (Cal Poly Pomona), a large, suburban, teaching institution, and then a graduate degree from the University of Maryland, a large suburban research institution located minutes from Washington, DC. I earned a doctoral degree at a small, selective, Jesuit institution, thereby culminating my own educational trajectory, which has deeply influenced my interest in the topic of school choice. The diversity of institutional type, geographic location, and size are all factors that informed my own understanding of school choice.

For the past 8 years, I had served as an administrator at a small, independent charter school. This experience allowed me to learn about the very diverse nature of charter schools, and the ways in which they serve the families and students as stated in their organization's mission. As the only Spanish speaking administrator, I was able to establish relationships with Latina/o parents and families who find themselves seeking a quality school for their children. An important layer to my role as researcher is that I approached this study with a unique perspective

of a school that is grappling with an increasingly affluent and less diverse population, thereby causing concern for the decreased access to quality educational option.

These roles and identities strongly informed my positionality and role as the researcher—both personally and professionally. I am emotionally invested in this topic as a way of understanding my own parent’s decisions as well as those of the families at my place of employment, who seek enrollment but are faced with space and capacity constraints. As both an insider and outsider to the topic, I aimed to maintain an objective perspective and focus on the narrative and voices of the participants, while recognizing feelings that arose during the data collection and analysis phase. To allow for this, a research journal served as a tool that documented and held these feelings, thoughts, and wonders that arose during the research process.

### **Methodological Issues and Limitations of the Study**

Efforts to ensure the credibility of this study were detailed throughout this chapter. However, despite these efforts, this study had various limitations, which include a purposefully defined sample size and criteria, the localized nature of the study and thus limited generalizability, and the relatively rigid nature of the narrative inquiry technique used in the study.

The use of a purposive sampling technique and criteria narrowed the participant pool in the study as not all individuals who wished to participate in this study were able to. This study focused on the experience of immigrant Latina/o families in the greater Los Angeles area, and therefore this was a qualifying demographic characteristic for participation. Furthermore, the

study was limited to individuals who had actively chosen schools for their children, as opposed to those who did not pursue a choice outside of their assigned district school.

As a research technique, narrative inquiry defined the manner in which the research interview was approached and conducted. The interactions between researcher and interviewee were limited to verbal and nonverbal listening cues and limited the prompting, follow-up questioning, or clarifications typical during a formal interview. (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Fraser (2004) indicated that narrative interviews have more of a conversational feel than a formally structured interview typically found in other qualitative research approaches. However, this technique was used because it provided the greatest opportunity for participants to narrate their own story without much influence or interjection by the researcher found in other interview approaches.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study employed a narrative inquiry approach to understanding the factors immigrant Latina/o families considered when researching and selecting a school for their children. Through narrative inquiry, the researcher developed an understanding of these factors and made meaning of them through the theoretical framework of socialization and institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Individual interviews with 13 participants generated data that were analyzed, coded, and categorized. The patterns of similarity and difference were then detailed in the findings chapter of the study.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

This study set out to understand the factors immigrant Latina/o immigrant parents considered when selecting a charter school for their children. Through narrative interviews, the researcher obtained personal stories of parents who detailed their thoughts about charter schools and the process undertaken when selecting a school for their children. These rich narratives provided insight into the process of researching, applying to, and enrolling in several charter schools in the greater Los Angeles area. The lived histories of participants provided additional context surrounding their own experiences which greatly informed their decision-making processes.

#### **Purpose of this Chapter**

This chapter presents the findings of narrative interviews conducted with 13 participants over a 3-month period between October and December 2017. These interviews elicited responses to the research questions of the study presented in the following pages of this chapter.

This chapter contains an overview of the purpose of the study, and then presents narratives of the participants who formed part of this study. These life stories detail the individual voices and histories of the participants in a way that contextualizes their experiences and offers a deeper understanding to their lives and decision to choose to enroll their children in a charter school. Next, the chapter contains the themes that emerged from the data through the inductive analysis of the interview transcripts. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings of the study.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this study was to understand what factors immigrant Latina/o families considered when researching and selecting a school for their children. Additionally, the study sought to understand how immigrant Latina/o families make meaning of the U.S. educational system, and to learn what immigrant Latina/o families considered to be characteristics of good schools, teachers, and education as a whole. These interconnected purpose statements were intentionally designed as building blocks to more deeply understand the complex topic of school choice.

The understanding of the factors considered in selecting a school required a deeper understanding of the personal beliefs and values that parents hold regarding education. Thus, participants were asked to detail their experiences with the educational institutions and systems they had been a part of. Participants were then asked to discuss the characteristics and qualities of a good teacher and a good school as well. Finally, participants reflected upon their own educational experiences and provided a comparison of their own education in their native homeland and that of their children in the United States.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study are:

Why and how do immigrant Latina/o parents in the greater Los Angeles area research and apply to charter schools?

What are the factors they consider in their decision making process?

These research questions explored the ways in which the U.S. educational system is understood, and how this understanding is used in the research and selection process of charter

schools for their children. These questions generated data that detailed participants' understanding of the education system and the various factors utilized by parents in the school research and selection process. The examination of these factors are set within the context of school choice and the manner in which parents make sense and understand the growing prevalence of choice schools in their neighborhoods and communities.

### **Research Process**

This qualitative study focused on the process immigrant Latina/o families in the greater Los Angeles area underwent when selecting a charter school for their children to attend. Through narrative interviews, participants offered their perspectives and experiences with the education system in the United States.

### **Study Participants**

Thirteen interviews were conducted with immigrant parents whose children were currently at or had formerly attended a charter school in the greater Los Angeles area. Table 1 provides a demographic summary of the participants. While the table contains an overview of participant demographics, narratives containing additional information about the lives and experiences of the participants of this study are found in the following section of the chapter. Each participant's voice and history is an essential part of this research because it has contextualized their decision to enroll their children in a charter school.

Table 1

*Participants of the Study*

<b>Participant name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Highest education level completed</b>	<b>Name of charter attended</b>	<b>Current parent/ alumni parent</b>	<b>Total years at charter</b>	<b>Number of children at charter</b>
Ana	Early 50s	Guatemala	Some college	Wonders Charter School	Current	6	1
Betty & Cristian	Late 40s	Mexico	3rd grade/ 1st grade	Wonders Charter School	Current & Alumni	4	2
Diana	Late 40s	Honduras	College graduate	Wonders Charter School	Current	< 1	1
Eva	Late 30s	Mexico	College graduate	Charter School for the Arts & Wonders Charter School	Current	5	1
Flor	Early 40s	El Salvador	High school graduate	Wonders Charter School & International City High Charter	Current & Alumni	12	3
Gabriela & Hector	Early 40s	Mexico	Middle school/ GED Certificate	Comunidad Charter School & Wonders Charter School	Current & Alumni	7	2
Isela	Mid 40s	Mexico	College graduate	Wonders Charter School	Current	9	2
Javier	Early 50s	El Salvador	Vocational training certificate	Wonders Charter School	Alumni	9	1
Karina	Late 30s	Mexico	Middle School	Ruedas Charter School	Current	<1	1
Maria	Late 40s	Argentina	Some college	Southern Charter Academy	Alumni	3	2

Nancy	Late 30s	Mexico	College graduate	Advantage Charter School	Former	5	1
Ofelia	Late 50s	El Salvador	Elementary school	Allegiant Charter High School	Current	3	1
Patty	Early 50s	Mexico	College graduate	Northwest Charter Academy	Current	6	1

### **Data Collection**

To best understand the topic of choice, this study utilized narrative interviews. As a qualitative methodology, narrative inquiry is grounded in the story of the participant in the study (Chase, 2003; Fraser, 2004). As a form of qualitative research, narratives allowed for the sharing of the events and processes that participants shared with the researcher during the interview process (Flick, 2014). The data presented in this chapter was obtained through the transcripts of interviews that were conducted, recorded, and transcribed by the researcher.

The data for this study was obtained from 13 face-to-face narrative interviews that were conducted by the researcher. The narrative interviews shifted the dynamic of interviewer-interviewee into one of narrator and listener for the purpose of obtaining a deep understanding of the story being shared and the meaning-making processes occurring during the interview (Chase, 2003; Fraser, 2004; Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). The narrative interview allowed participants to share salient moments of their lived experiences and included stories that provided context to their experience (Chase, 2003).

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this study occurred over the course of 3 months as the researcher conducted, transcribed, and coded the data obtained from participants. This extended period of



time allowed for a nuanced understanding of the experiences shared by the participants. A line-by-line narrative analysis (Fraser, 2004) and an open-coding analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were used as the primary data analysis methods for this study.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

The data collection and analysis process generated several key findings that deepened the understanding of the charter school selection process by Latina/o immigrant parents. Parents indicated finding better educational opportunities for their children in charter schools. As immigrants to the United States, they personally endured hardships and challenges when they left their native countries, and viewed education as a pathway toward upward social mobility. The opportunity of a quality education for their children guided their search and demonstrated their own commitment to the improvement of their lives and the lives and future of their children.

The key role of immigrant parents' social network and capital emerged as a major element in this study. Parents cited friends, family members, neighbors, and other individuals in their networks as the those who led them to find and eventually enroll at the charter school their children attended. While the relationship may not have been very strong or established, the trust placed by parents in these members of their social network played a key role in the identification and selection of a better educational environment for their children.

Latina/o immigrant parents spoke at length about the importance of proactive involvement and engagement in their children's education. Parents valued being involved as members of their school community, and active participants in their children's education. The relationship parents established with classroom teachers, school staff, and administrators were seen as important in their connection to the school and in being viewed as members of the school

community. While all participants of this study were immigrants, more than 60% were educated in their native countries and had formal education that included college degrees. This suggests that parents who actively choose and select a particular school for their children may be guided by their own educational attainment and personal values surrounding the importance of a quality education.

Equally important to parents were the factors that ultimately led them to select a charter school for their children; these included close proximity to home, attentive teachers, the leadership of the school, support for students' learning needs and challenges, a welcoming community, a Spanish-language friendly campus, and evidence of strong parental involvement.

### **Participant Narratives**

#### **Ana**

Ana left her native Guatemala in the mid-1990s for the United States in search of better future and life. Her family was of meager means in Guatemala, but despite the need to work, she persisted in her schooling and went on to the university, where she nearly completed her degree in economics. Due to the declining health of her father, Ana indicated that she was unable to graduate from college and go on to work in local government as she had anticipated. This unfortunate turn of events left her at a loss, and as many others in her situation she took a job that would be able to help provide for her parents and younger sister. With this change went her aspirations of a college degree and a better future in her homeland.

With just a few connections in California, Ana left Guatemala and immigrated to Los Angeles. Despite having no English language skills, she secured employment as a nanny for a family's two young children. As the years went by, she met her husband, married, and shortly

thereafter they became parents to their son, Alex. Once Alex was born, Ana spent the majority of his childhood as a homemaker tending to their household and as a babysitter to other children in their apartment.

During a walk in the park with a child she was babysitting, Ana first heard of charter schools from two individuals who were recruiting families to attend a new charter school opening in her neighborhood. Despite the peculiar setting of the interaction, she offered to listen to a more detailed presentation of the school several days later in her home. In the 4 years her son attended a traditional public school, she had suffered many disappointments, negative encounters, and unpleasant experiences that led her to seek a different educational environment. As a homemaker, she had the opportunity to be very active and involved in her son's school—she served as president, treasurer, and secretary of the school's parent group and volunteered several times a week at the campus. Ana jokingly recounted feeling as if she worked at the school. Her son's experience was quite different. From early on when he started kindergarten, she noticed something different in her son Alex. “Vi algo diferente en cuestión de su aprendizaje y pedí mucha ayuda . . . pero nunca hicieron algo por mi hijo” [I saw something different in terms of his learning and I asked for a lot of help . . . but they never did anything for my son]. She pleaded with his teacher, spoke to administrators and office staff to find ways to help him, to no avail. Four years after being at the school and not feeling her son was making academic progress, she felt she needed to make a change. “Lo que más me hizo cambiar fue cuando mi hijo me decía, ‘Má sácame de esta escuela, ya no quiero esta escuela, cámbiame’ [What most prompted me to find a different school was when my son began telling me, ‘Mom take me out of this school, I don't want this school, take me elsewhere], she recounted sadly.

Listening to the staff discuss the educational program being offered at the charter school, coupled with her current school experiences, convinced her to apply and enroll Alex at the charter school. He completed third and fourth grade at the charter school operated by an educational management organization (EMO) with schools across the Los Angeles region and various states across the country. In those 2 years, his academic progress grew significantly and he was finally happy and thriving in school. Shortly after enrolling, he was assessed and identified as eligible to receive special education services that would support his academic growth and development. Ana indicated that this support made a tremendous difference in his self-esteem and identity as a student.

However, 2 years later, they found themselves in search of another school after the charter school he was attending abruptly closed due to a facility safety issue. “De un día a otro llegaron y la censuraron” [From one day to the next, they came and they closed it], she shared. Ana recounted the despair she felt upon learning that the charter school her son had been attending for the past 2 years had been deemed unsafe and was being forced to close its doors overnight. Although all the currently enrolled students were offered enrollment at another campus of the charter school network, it was too far for Ana’s limited driving range. Ana indicated that she felt physically ill when she learned the school was closing and she would need to find an alternative for her son. For the past 2 years, they had been at the school where she felt he was finally receiving the support her son needed to succeed, and the thought of having to re-enroll at a traditional public school was unfathomable to her. Almost by sheer luck, she learned about Wonders Charter School (WCS) from another parent who was also in search of a new school for their child, “Vayan a Wonders Charter . . . allá tienen cupo para unos grados” [Go to

Wonders Charter . . . they have space for some grades there]. Without any hesitation, she took her son, and began driving toward the school without knowing where exactly she was going. For her, the risk of uncertainty of an unknown charter school outweighed the alternative of returning to a district-operated school.

At the time of this study, Alex was an eighth-grader at Wonders Charter School, where he had been enrolled since the fifth grade. Wonders Charter was an independent charter school that enrolled 480 students in grades kindergarten through eighth. As the end of eighth grade neared at WCS, Ana was adamant about her desire to have him attend a charter high school; she was unwilling to enroll Alex in the local district high school. Although she knew she could not keep him young forever, she feared he will be exposed to sex, drugs, and bad influences at her local high school, which children of her friends and neighbors currently attended.

As she reflected upon her experiences and thought about the next chapter in Alex's educational journey into high school, she shared about the challenging conversations and discussions she encountered with friends and family members when she first opted to enroll in a charter school. She heard about many misconceptions that exist around charter schools—they were only for students who were mentally challenged, they charged tuition, charter schools were not legitimate schools, and students who attend charter school are ineligible to attend college. What she found most striking about these remarks was that none of the individuals saying this had ever attended a charter school. Despite her limited knowledge and experience in the U.S. educational system, Ana understood the sociopolitical context of charter schools and the ways in which they are viewed as being in competition with district schools. Several of her sisters-in-law were teachers in traditional public schools in Southern California, and none of them offered any

positive feedback about charter schools when she sought a different school for Alex. As she thought back, the only person who encouraged her to seek a charter school was a teacher at her son's elementary school who confided in her that her son would be better served at a charter school.

### **Betty and Cristian**

During the 75-minute interview, the topics of willpower, faith, hard work, and sacrifice were prominent for Betty and Cristian. Both were in their late 40s. They had been married since 1991 and were parents to three children—Anthony a 23-year-old medical school student in New York, Bobby a 14-year-old freshman at the local district high school, and Carol a 9-year-old fourth grader at Wonders Charter School (WCS).

Neither Betty nor Cristian had prospects of a great future in the small town where they were born and raised. Betty only completed third grade of elementary school and Cristian only attended first grade. “La pobreza es mucha alla” [The level of poverty in Mexico there is bad], Betty shared when recalling what life was like before immigrating to the United States in the mid-1980s. Without much sense of direction but a strong will to succeed and get ahead, they left their native Mexico for the United States, where they hoped to forge a more prosperous future for themselves.

When they spoke about their children, they discussed in detail the ways that hard work, sacrifices, and rewards were emphasized in their home. For both Betty and Cristian, their ultimate sacrifice was working as 24/7 live-in health aides for 17 years, earning less than minimum wage. That challenging experience allowed them to amass a substantial savings that enabled them to purchase their own home—a piece of the American dream. Betty had been a

homemaker for the past 10 years or so, and Cristian had been a commercial truck driver for about the same period of time. For both Betty and Cristian, they knew and were seeing the rewards that come from hard work, commitment, and sacrifices. However, they were quick to note the importance of their family and the time they spend together as well. “Yes que no todo es el dinero . . . tienes que estar anivelado” [Money is not everything . . . you need to have a life that is balanced] was how Cristian described his belief in the need to balance work and family life.

As the time came for their oldest son Anthony to attend school, they chose a Catholic school. For them, a faith-based education was an important way of imparting their religious traditions to their firstborn son. For all of his elementary and secondary schooling, Anthony attended local Catholic schools until he graduated and went on to attend a large state university in New York. The cost of tuition for more than one child at the Catholic school rendered the family financially unable to afford sending their other children to Catholic school as well. Their younger children, Bobby and Carol, attended their local district school before enrolling at WCS 4 years ago. Bobby attended their local district school from kindergarten through fifth grade, and Carole, their youngest daughter, only attended that school her kindergarten year.

Betty and Cristian noted two main considerations in selecting a charter school—the referral from a parent currently attending Wonders Charter and the proximity of the school to their home. “We live just three blocks from here” they shared. Although their experience at their local district school had been adequate, they applied and enrolled at WCS because of its proximity to their home. During their tours of the school and their subsequent enrollment, their appeal to the charter school grew when they saw firsthand the different manner in which the school functioned in comparison to their local public school. They described the difference

primarily in terms of the conversations and interactions they saw between teachers and students, between staff and parents, between parents and teachers, and among parents as well. In their local district school, they found these various types of interactions to be short, cold, and sometimes disrespectful. Betty and Cristian shared that they stopped attending parent meetings and gatherings at their former school primarily due to the unfriendly nature of other parents who also attended these meetings and gatherings.

Similar to several other participants another influencing factor to attend Wonders Charter was the recommendation by a parent whose child was currently attending the school. For Betty and Cristian, this parent was their friend and neighbor who shared her satisfaction with the school. Additionally, they liked hearing about the child's like of his teachers and the school during the years he had been enrolled at WCS. When dialoguing about elements they liked about Wonders Charter School, they noted the visibility of the school principal, the attentiveness of teachers, the behavior of students, and the friendliness of the parent community as major features that were different and better than their district school. Seeing these things reaffirmed their wish for their children to attend WCS, and when they were notified of an opening 2 weeks into the start of the school year, they promptly unenrolled both their children from the local public school they had been attending and brought them to WCS. While they recognized the move could be disruptive, they were unsure they would have an opportunity to enroll in the future. As is the case in various charter schools, they applied for admission several times before being admitted and enrolling at WCS.

As they discussed their experiences at the various schools their children had attended, the most important elements for them were the teachers, staff, and overall feel and environment of



the school. While never dissatisfied with their district school experience, they indicated that the teachers never felt like they were fully vested and cared enough about students and their learning. They highlighted several events and activities that happened at WCS that they had not experienced before; they both shared events that were important in helping students and parents feel connected to the school, their teachers, other students, and parents of the school. These programs allowed both Betty and Cristian the opportunity to develop cordial relationships with various other parents on campus, albeit limited due to their remedial English language skills. In addition, they indicated the personable administrators, staff, teachers, and other parents were highlights of the tour they had of the school several years before being able to enroll. Betty expressed gratitude for the opportunity to have their children attend WCS; “Gracias a Dios que entramos y estamos muy contentos con el sistema que tienen aquí” [Thank God we got into the school and we are very happy with the school system here].

As a young child, Cristian would use part of his earnings to ensure that his younger siblings had notebooks, pencils, backpacks, or any other materials they needed for school; even if that meant he did not have money to buy something for himself. The opportunities they had been afforded to immigrate to the United States and to be employed, and the many opportunities their three children had had throughout their schooling were highlights of their lives. This stood in stark contrast to the unavailability of any opportunities for an education or a future in their native Mexico.

Despite their lack of formal education, or perhaps as a result of this, they were both keenly aware of the need for their three children to persist and succeed in school. In addition, since Anthony first started school about 20 years ago, they had always kept themselves informed

and involved in their children's education. They shared the ways they managed their calendars to attend parent meetings, volunteer for classroom field trips, and attend weekend and evening events and activities. Being active and involved was something they believed was essential to their children's success, and they were perplexed when they encountered others who had a hands-off attitude. "No sé, es como si ni les importa . . . no lo puedo creer" [I don't know, it is as if they don't care . . . I can't believe it], shared Betty when discussing her own sister's lack of involvement in her children's education. Although Bobby was a freshman in high school, Betty regularly attended parent meetings, interacted with his teachers, and made it a point to prioritize his needs as he was at an age where she felt he needed more close supervision.

### **Diana**

"Le gusta su escuela, llega cantando el nombre de su escuela y eso es bonito" [She likes her school, she sings the name of her school and that is beautiful], said Diana about her 5-year-old daughter, Mari. Despite only having been in kindergarten at Wonders Charter School (WCS) for 3 months, Diana was happy with their experience at the school thus far.

Diana's list of school options for kindergarten was just two choices—Wonders Charter and her local public school. She first learned about WCS well before Mari was of age to attend school. The grandchildren of her babysitter were students at WCS and their father spoke highly of the school. That family drove from across town to attend Wonders, which to her was an indicator it was a good school if they were willing to drive so far for a school. Additionally, her husband's two nieces had attended and graduated from WCS and were both happy about their schooling. Since she was not familiar with charter schools and how they functioned, she visited

the school with the mother of her nieces, where they met with a school administrator who provided her information about enrollment and scheduled a tour of the school for her.

During her brief visit and the subsequent tour, what most stood out to Diana about the school was the feel of the campus. She liked the environment of the school, the classrooms, and the type of students and parents who attended. “Se ve la clase de personas que vienen” [You can tell the type of people who come here], she shared. For her, the demeanor of parents and their parenting style were elements she did not like about the district preschool program Mari had attended the previous year. Both she and her husband witnessed several children disciplined by their parents in a harsh manner that they did not approve of or feel was appropriate for young children.

She noted how well-mannered the parents, students, and teachers all were at WCS and stated this was a characteristic that really led her to feel Wonders was a good school. As a new parent with limited English language skills, Diana found the support of her classroom teacher and teacher assistant very helpful. They both went out of their way to provide information about what was being learned, offered additional materials to support her daughter’s learning at home, and was relieved she did not need to rely on an external translator as her classroom teacher assistant spoke Spanish.

As she discussed what she enjoyed about Wonders, she spoke about the teachers and staff whom she had encountered. Diana spoke about the qualities she believed good teachers should possess—patience, love for children, and love for their craft. Although her daughter had only been enrolled at WCS for 3 months, she had seen the love and patience teachers had for their students at WCS in several ways. She had witnessed this in the manner the teacher spent time

with each child, ensuring they were learning, providing parents updates about their learning, and even in the way children were guided and shown how to navigate the campus. As a mother, she said, “This is beautiful . . . this is everything for me.”

Before immigrating to the United States in 2009, Diana was an accountant in her native Honduras, where she earned her college degree in business administration. Before leaving Honduras, she intended to come to the United States, learn English, and update her degree to allow her to gain employment related to her college degree. Now in her late 30s, Diana found the language barrier had been extremely difficult to overcome and her life as a wife and now mother prevented her from pursuing her career aspirations. As she discussed the future, Diana expressed relief and was content knowing her daughter would have a school through the eighth grade.

### **Eva**

With a quiet yet firm demeanor, Eva shared her story of navigating schools with measured enthusiasm. Eva was an educator in her early 40s whose parents had immigrated to the United States when she was a young child. Unlike most participants of this study, Eva completed all of her schooling in the United States, including her graduate degree and teaching credentials. During our nearly 90-minute conversation, Eva shared her values around nontraditional learning environments and her personal beliefs of an ideal educational experience for her 10-year-old son, Julio.

For several years now, Eva had been employed at an in-home childcare, which was her first introduction to Wonders Charter School. “I knew about Wonders because some of the kids have come here” she stated. As a lifelong educator, she was very particular about what she was seeking in a school for Julio—a dual-language program, a progressive and forward-thinking

environment, a school where social-emotional development was emphasized, and a place where diversity was valued and present in the school. As a parent and educator, her preference was for an environment that was not as closed or rigid. Eva indicated her priority for Julio was more in social emotional learning than in academics, which was different from other participants.

In her prior experience as a teacher at a charter management organization (CMO)—operated charter high school in the Los Angeles area, Eva experienced firsthand the rigidity of a traditional learning environment. She shared how hard it was to be a teacher in what was supposed to be an alternative environment—a charter school—that followed a very traditional public-school structure. In their first experience with school, Julio attended its district-operated language academy school because it offered Spanish as an option which was—and continued to be—important for Eva. However, just a few days into his kindergarten year, she began questioning whether the school would be a good fit for her. Parents were expected to drop off students at the gate and they could not walk them to class; volunteering was not permitted in the classrooms; and school administrators were not willing to discuss or budge on any of the policies in place.

Dissatisfied with this aspect of the school, she took the offer for an enrollment opening at an arts-based charter school in an adjacent neighborhood. While she understood that different schools offer different things, she was once again disappointed with what she encountered. The school was located in a commercial building that had very few windows and only minimal outdoor green space. In contrast to the school's nonpunitive and progressive philosophies, Julio's teacher used classroom management techniques that were punitive and shameful in nature that began creating anxiety for him. One month before the end of his kindergarten year, Eva made the

decision to return to the dual-language program at her local district school because she was very dissatisfied with the way the charter school was not receptive to the feedback she was sharing about her son's teacher.

Despite her best wishes in returning to her district school, the environment had not changed and she remained unable to access the campus, be involved in the classroom, or support Julio's transition into class. "I had a few run-ins with the principal . . . I think I caught the eye of the administration," she admitted smilingly. For Eva, helping Julio transition into class by reading a book as class started or spending a few minutes on the playground together were very important, however these were not options at the school. While she very much wanted him to have the dual-language instructional program, she understood not every school would offer everything she wanted. Taking stock of her wants in a school, she decided to once again leave that school when she received an offer for enrollment at Wonders Charter School in early October of his first-grade year. Although she feared a rough transition to a new school, she felt better knowing Wonders understood, valued, and honored students' social emotional learning and development.

"I am a big advocate of dual-language, right, and I think if there were to be a progressive school with dual language, then that would be my perfect school" she shared. For Eva, trade-offs were something that she understood yet felt uneasy about. She deeply value the dual-language piece, but her decision to enroll at WCS was fueled by its progressive philosophy, the focus on social emotional development, the physical environment of the school, and the several families who she knew already attending Wonders. As she reflected back on their 5 years at the school,

she had no regrets about the school and was at ease knowing Julio was in the right school through the eighth grade.

In our conversation, Eva discussed her feelings about charter schools as well. As a child of working-class immigrants, it was always expected she would do well in school, regardless of the school she attended. As a student in the 1980s, choosing a school was a foreign concept to her parents; children went to the closest school to their home because that was most convenient. To this day, her parents were dismayed she had chosen a charter school instead of a traditional public school for Julio. “My parents are big advocates of public education and that it should be sufficient. I do too, but the reality of the current public education system is otherwise,” she added.

Eva admitted she grappled with the complicated relationship between charter schools and the traditional public-school system. She felt district schools should be meeting the needs of all students and families within their own community and that parents should not have to drive 20 minutes each way to school. Unfortunately, she had experienced firsthand that this belief was just an illusion for many families. In our discussion around educational landscapes, she shared, “I understand that Wonders isn’t really following the corporate model.” She added that her father had once been employed at the campus of Wonders when it was a district school as a community liaison and teacher assistant. This furthered her sentiments surrounding the complicated nature of charter schools and was very frank about how her experiences, both positive and negative, were not universal but rather unique. Eva had a keen understanding about “this variety within district schools and charter schools . . . I understand not every charter school will succeed just like not every district school will succeed.” In her ideal world, the distinction between charter and district

schools would not exist because all schools would be serving the needs of all students and families.

When asked to discuss her thoughts around the qualities of a good teacher, she was quick and eager to share her thoughts. Her intersecting identities as a parent and educator enabled Eva to name a multitude of qualities for being a good teacher. These included teacher intuition about students, connecting to make students feel safe, dialogue between parents and teachers, balance of structure and flexibility, mutual respect, academically challenging classroom environment, appropriate conflict resolution strategies, and “picking up on the different needs, backgrounds, and culture . . . family and cultural traditions” of students. As a parent, these values guided her own process for seeking a school for her son; as a teacher, these were characteristics she believed would have a positive impact on a child’s educational experience. In concluding the interview, Eva smiled and shared for her these were all qualities she had found evidence of at Wonders Charter School.

**Flor**

Navigating schools for her son Eric had not been easy for Flor. Her youngest son, Eric, was a high-functioning autistic 13-year-old boy currently in the seventh grade at Wonders Charter School (WCS). He had been a student there since the first grade but had attended two traditional public schools prior to enrolling at WCS in 2011. His older sister, Sara, was a high school sophomore at a small independent school who had attended WCS from kindergarten through eighth grade; their older brother, James, attended Wonders for the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades in the early 2000s.



Flor and her husband, Gary, had been living in Northeast Los Angeles for nearly 20 years, where they have raised their three children. Before moving there, they lived in a primarily Latino suburb in Southeast Los Angeles. Flor was in her late 40s and a native of El Salvador who arrived at the United States at the age of 10; Gary was in his early 40s and had been born and raised in Southern California by parents of Mexican descent. Both Flor and Gary attended traditional public schools in the LA Unified School District.

For Flor and Gary, their decision to attend a charter school came somewhat by chance. When they relocated to their current neighborhood, their oldest son, James, had just completed fifth grade, and Flor took on the task of researching schools near their home. After talking with neighbors and visiting the local middle school, she was displeased with the over-crowdedness and student behaviors she saw. In discussing this with her husband, he mentioned that he had recently read about a new type of schools that were emerging—charter schools. A news article from National Public Radio served as the source information that led Flor and Gary to begin looking for a charter school for their sixth-grade son, James, near their home. “It was just like a shot in the dark...we tend to be a little more think out of the box kind of people,” was how Flor described their initial decision to find and enroll at a charter school. Flor applied to three different charters near their home but their extensive enrollment wait lists prevented them from enrolling. It was then that she came across Wonders Charter, which was only in its fourth year of operation when they enrolled in the fall of 2003.

In thinking about what initially attracted Flor to WCS, she discussed three primary factors—the small size of the school, its emphasis on hands-on learning, and the diversity of the campus. As a recent arrival to the country, Flor vividly recalled her experience of starting the

fourth grade at a very large school, which was quite different from the small, intimate school she had attended in El Salvador. With her own experience in mind, she knew it was important that her children feel a sense of connection to their school and their teachers. Unfortunately, she also knew the large public schools in their neighborhood would be unable to provide this.

For kindergarten through fifth grade, their oldest son had attended a traditional public school in suburban Los Angeles, where Flor indicated that he had “done okay.” However, he did not have the best experience because their teaching methodology was not working out so well for him; Flor stated he was a better hands-on learner and the teaching style at the school was primarily auditory. As such, James was often frustrated during school but did not present any major behavioral issues. For Flor, she found the varied instructional methodologies used at Wonders as a big selling point. The school’s mission, instructional approach, and the friendliness of the teachers during her visit solidified her decision for James to enroll at WCS in sixth grade.

As she continued, she shared that diversity was a key consideration for her in selecting WCS. While his previous public school had a large population of Latina/o students, Flor was unsure James would “fit in” in a predominantly immigrant school like the ones found in their new neighborhood. “Culturally he was already different and I felt like he was not going to fit in and that he was going to regress,” was how she expressed this sentiment. In visiting Wonders, she saw the diversity of the classrooms and felt the racial and ethnic diversity of the school would be better for James. Upon seeing the classrooms and nature of the educational program of the school, Flor enrolled him at Wonders Charter, where he completed the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. After WCS, James went on to attend a local charter high school near their home.

After their initial choice for James to enroll at Wonders, it became easy for them to have Sara, their middle daughter, attend WCS when she was of age for kindergarten. In their short 3 years at WCS, they enjoyed the community and teachers of the school, and therefore did not hesitate to have her also attend. However, the process of choosing a school for their youngest son was a bit more complicated, as his needs were different. When Eric reached the age to attend kindergarten, he was enrolled at their local school that offered the educational services he needed due to his learning needs. However, just a few months into his kindergarten year, for reasons unbeknownst to Flor, the school stopped offering special education services, and he was transferred to a different school a few neighborhoods away from their home. There, he was enrolled in a special day class where he received specialized academic instruction and support in a small learning environment alongside other students with disabilities. As the year started, Flor found herself advocating for Eric because the anticipated classroom teacher had unexpectedly quit and, for several weeks, a school administrator without appropriate training and credentials was serving as the classroom teacher. This situation left Flor quite uneasy with the school, but her biggest frustration came later in the year when she did not see evidence of Eric's growth and development either socially or academically. She determined he was being left behind because he had far fewer needs than other students in his classroom, and when she requested a modification in placement, the school principal was unwilling to entertain her request. Beyond a change of placement, Flor was uncertain that Eric was socially prepared to engage with older students in the second grade, and felt that repeating the first grade in a general education setting would be a good option for them. After several discussions, it became clear to her that her requests would not be honored. Feeling uneasy about the impending start of the school year in

September, Flor approached the principal at Wonders, explained her situation, and asked about the possibility of having Eric enroll there as a first-grade student. Without any hesitation, he was promptly enrolled, and Eric became a student at Wonders Charter alongside his older sister, Sara.

As she discussed their experience, the relationships they had forged are the highlight of their 14-year experience at WCS. “What I love the most is that you get to know the students really well . . . and the parents too because you have relationships with them,” she shared. For Flor and Gary, attending Wonders Charter had been about more than what their children learned academically. The sense of community and the quality of their teachers stood out as elements they believed were characteristics of a good school. In addition, she noted how she had seen the way in which schools within the LA Unified School District were taking cues from charter schools and offering specialty programs such as drama, theatre, and film to attract students into the schools.

Flor closed our conversation by expressing her gratitude for their experience at Wonders, and further shared she believed it was the relationships they had with the administration at WCS that enabled Sara to be admitted to a selective private school in the area.

### **Gabby and Hector**

“Fuimos a aquella escuela porque alguien nos la recomendó” [We went to that school at the recommendation of someone we know], shared Gabby and Hector, referring to the first charter school their sons, David and Eddie, had attended. David had attended Wonders Charter School (WCS) for 2 years and was now a 17-year-old senior at a district high school; Eddie was a 13-year-old eighth grader at WCS; their oldest daughter, Jasmine, was a college sophomore who had attended local district schools for all of her schooling. Both natives of Mexico, Gabby

and Hector shared their experience of attending various public and charter schools with their sons before enrolling at Wonders Charter 6 years ago.

Finding schools for their older children, David and Jasmine, was not challenging for Gabby and Hector. When they emigrated from Mexico with their just their two eldest children, they found themselves asking friends and extended family members for guidance in the enrollment process at the traditional public school. Although Jasmine and David were native Spanish speakers, with adequate support from their teachers at the local school, they did fine in school. While they anticipated the same with Eddie, their experience was quite different.

Eddie first attended the same traditional public school his siblings attended, but at the start of the second grade, Gabby and Hector felt they needed a change because he was not demonstrating any growth in his learning. Upon the recommendation from a friend who had heard about the school, he was enrolled at a small charter school that shared a campus with a LA Unified elementary school in a neighborhood of Northeast Los Angeles. They described their transition as challenging for them as parents and for Eddie as well; the school was approximately 25 minutes away from their home, and its strong emphasis on academics and achievement took a toll on Eddie, who was already struggling academically. Despite the distance of the charter school, they found the smaller environment, different teaching methods, and attentive staff to be attractive features. In that same year, however, the school announced their intention to relocate farther away, thereby prompting Gabby and Hector to begin searching for a new school closer to their home.

Having experienced traditional public schools and a charter school, they took it upon themselves to search the Internet for charter schools near their home. “Investigamos nosotros

solos . . . y llegamos aquí y hablamos contigo” [We searched on our own, and we ended up here where we spoke with you], shared Gabby. Their satisfaction with Wonders was rooted in the support and attention that Eddie had been provided at the school. Although their youngest son attended both a traditional district school and a recommended charter school, it was not until he was enrolled at Wonders Charter that Eddie was assessed and identified as having a learning disability. For years, Gabby and Hector wondered why he was not doing well in school, and tried various strategies to support him at home, only to be left confused. While they had been informed by his prior teachers that he seemed to struggle with school, neither an assessment nor evaluation to determine the cause was ever mentioned. After identifying his learning disability, and receiving support, Eddie had made significant progress in both his academic and social development.

In their 6 years as parents at Wonders, they indicated, the level of support and attention their sons David and Eddie had received was the highlight of their experience. In contrast to their other schools, several of their teachers and staff had been able to establish relationships with them in Spanish, which helped them feel welcome and a part of the school community. The close proximity to their home had also been a feature they enjoyed, as both Gabby and Hector worked and they relied on family members for help with getting them to school. When they thought why they would recommend Wonders to others, they cited the school’s focus and attention on students as their primary reason. They also indicated the level of communication and involvement by teachers as important features.

As the end of the eighth grade neared, Gabby and Hector both indicated they were very interested in ensuring their youngest son Eddie attended a charter high school. While they

understood the legal responsibility schools had to provide him the support indicated in his individualized educational plan, they feared their local high school might not be the best place for him. Based on their prior experience with local district schools and a lack of responsiveness to his needs during his first 3 years of school, their hesitation to attend a district high school was understandable. Furthermore, they were concerned for the large size of the traditional district high school he would attend; it enrolled over 1,800 students. Having only attended small schools with few students, and being a very timid student, they feared Eddie would get lost in the masses of students.

As Gabby and Hector reflected upon their own educational experiences, they noted the usefulness of the education provided to students as a major difference between schooling in the United States and in their native Mexico. Hector recalled needing to learn country names, capitals, and flags, which for him served little purpose. Gabby shared she had higher expectations of the content being taught to students as she felt students in the United States did not have the same rigorous content expectations as she did in Mexico. She shared an anecdote of an instance with her daughter Jasmine, who was struggling to learn square roots in high school. When Gabby attempted to help her complete the task, she recalled being very surprised she was just starting to be exposed to the content. “Eso lo aprendi yo en la primaria” [I learned that in elementary school] recalled Gabby; in various other instances, she had similar thoughts when reviewing work with her sons David and Eddie.

Beyond this specific example, Gabby also had similar thoughts about the pace and expectations for reading and writing that her children were given in U.S. schools. For both Hector and her, they recalled that fluency in reading and writing was a requirement for

promotion from the first to the second grade of elementary school. As a result, when their youngest son Eddie was struggling with school early on, she began to feel uncomfortable with the level of schooling he was receiving. To illustrate the difference in educational experiences and expectation she stated, “Les decimos a los niños, si ustedes van a la escuela en México, se desmayan” [We tell our kids, if you were to go to school in Mexico you will be severely overwhelmed as it is much harder].

Although both Gabby and Hector attended school in Mexico, Gabby only finished the eighth grade and then went on to vocational training in computing. Hector attended 3 years of high school in Mexico, but did not graduate. After immigrating to the United States, both Gabby and Hector attended night school to learn English. “El idioma es la primera piedra en el camino aquí” (The lack of English language skills is a major obstacle for us), stated Hector. While both Hector and Gabby attended and completed several years of English classes, only Hector continued going to night school and went on to earn a GED. As they reflected upon their overall experience with the educational system, they found themselves content with the opportunities they had been afforded and particularly with the help and support Eddie had received throughout.

### **Isela**

Now in her mid-40s, Isela fondly reminisced about her own schooling experience growing up in the city of Ensenada in Mexico. She recounted vividly the meticulous care and level of detail that went into her school uniform, the way she pleaded with her parents to allow her to take the public bus to school rather than the paid transportation they had arranged for her, and the two-schedule tracks of most schools in Mexico. As she reflected upon her own experience and compared it to that of her daughters, she did not find any significant differences



at the elementary school level. However, as she thought about her college experience, she wished the U.S. higher education system were more accessible. Isela attended the University of Baja, California, where earned her bachelor's degree and became a certified public accountant. In contrast to the United States, higher education in Mexico is free for all students at the public university system. Upon graduation, she went to work as an accountant at a maquiladora for over a decade before immigrating to the United States in 2001. After arriving in the United States, she began attending the local community college to further her English fluency; and, while her ultimate goal was to resume her career as an accountant in the United States, these plans were sidetracked when she and her husband began their family in 2004.

In speaking about schools, Isela stated, “Nuestra primera opción no era aquí” [This was not our first choice]. For her, their neighborhood public school was their first choice; their second was also a district school, and Wonders Charter School was their third choice. However, her interest in Wonders grew when she was approached by someone walking her neighborhood that was looking for a home in the area. They spoke about the neighborhood for a bit and what most struck her about that conversation was that the parent was seeking to relocate to the area primarily so her twin sons could attend Wonders. “Entonces eso fue lo que nos prendió la duda de esta escuela” [That got us thinking more about this school], she stated. She figured if someone was willing to relocate to the neighborhood for the school, then the school had a certain appeal that she felt she needed to learn more about.

With only a head start program as experience in the U.S. educational system, Isela did not have many ideas of what she wanted in a school for her daughters, Mayra and Denise. In an effort to be better informed about the schools in her community, Isela and her husband began

touring and visiting schools when Mayra was 3 years old, 2 years in advance of her entry into kindergarten. They visited two traditional public schools and two charter schools within relative proximity to their home. It was during those visits that she was able to see the classroom environments of over 30 students at the traditional public schools, which for Isela felt overcrowded. Although they applied at both Wonders and another local charter school, her oldest daughter, Mayra, was admitted via an enrollment lottery at Wonders, and waitlisted at the other school. Her younger daughter Denise began attending kindergarten at Wonders 3 years later, when Mayra was starting the second grade.

In discussing the appeal about WCS, Isela shared several factors that influenced her decision to enroll at the school—the location of the school in relation to their home, the number of students in each classroom was small in comparison to the traditional public school, and the physical layout of the campus with open space and single-story buildings that were appealing from a safety perspective. Finally, she noted that the furnishings and materials in the classrooms were appealing. With her daughter Mayra now in eighth grade, and her younger daughter, Denise, in fifth grade, Isela noted the caliber of teachers, schoolwide focus on students, and availability of teacher assistants in the classrooms as additional reasons that influenced their decision to stay at Wonders for all their elementary school years.

In learning about what characteristics she sought in schools for her daughters, she discussed the importance of the “ambiente” [atmosphere/environment] of the school. Upon further elaboration, she not only referred to the physical environment of the campus and the classrooms, but also to the non-physical feel of the campus; the environment created and maintained by teachers, students, staff, and parents. “Un ambiente a gusto y comfortable que no

estén llorando en la mañana que no quiero ir a la escuela” [An environment that is comfortable and feels good where students are not crying in the morning saying they do not want to go to school], stated Isela. The proximity of the school to their home was another important piece, but much less than the feel of the school. As her eldest daughter, Mayra, prepared to graduate from eighth grade, and was to start high school in a few months, Isela also shared the leadership of a school was an important element that she believed influenced the quality of a school.

As the conversation shifted into their current experience at Wonders, Isela described a strength of the school as the caliber and preparation of the teachers. Throughout the years her daughters had been enrolled at the school, she had found teachers conduct thoughtful and well-structured lessons for their students. She noted the way in which teachers integrated field trips and excursions into lessons as a highlight that made her and her daughters glad to attend WCS. Another facet she enjoyed was the mindfulness of the school for students’ extra-curricular activities outside of school. Both Mayra and Denise had been taking voice and dance lessons for several years, and while their peers at other schools struggled with managing their homework and extra-curricular activities, she had not encountered this. In speaking with other parents during their music lessons, Isela has learned that many traditional district schools had students complete weekly homework packets that were very time consuming and stressful to both parents and students. As a working mother, Isela indicated she felt good knowing her daughters had a manageable homework load that allowed them to participate in music and dance courses outside of school.

In learning about Isela’s life story, she shared how she had experienced charter schools as different than traditional district schools. The primary difference cited was the behavior and

demeanor of students. For several years, she was employed as an instructional aide at a district middle school, and noticed the lack of manners, disorderly conduct of students, the inability of teachers to manage their classrooms, and the large number of students as factors in what she called “una escuela descontrolada” [a disorderly school]. Isela believed the number of students enrolled in a school was a major factor in explaining this; the middle school where she was once employed enrolled over 1,000 students, which she felt was far too large.

Although she understood students have different backgrounds and home lives, she went on to discuss her sentiment that students at charter schools “como que son un poquito mas educados de como vienen de su casa” [It is as if charter school students are better behaved and have better manners]. Isela was able to elaborate upon this further and shared that, for her, parents who choose charter schools are more aware of what they seek in a school and are intentional in their selection. She conceptualized this in two pieces—the researching of schools, which included knowing and seeking schools that had features and elements she found important. In their case, Isela and her husband wanted a school that had lawns and outdoor green spaces for their daughters to play. Additionally, Isela believed it was important that parents know their children and understand them as learners. For her, this meant discovering whether a particular school would be a good fit in terms of the academic program or educational philosophies of the school. For Isela and her eldest daughter, Mayra, this was a current point of discussion as they researched high schools she may enroll in for the fall term. Although Mayra had a preference for a particular district high school, Isela was aware this was not their geographically assigned school and she may not be able to enroll as her first choice. Therefore,

Isela was adamant they have a short list of schools that would give her options for where she could enroll her daughter for freshman year in the fall.

Although a significant period of time had passed since Isela and her husband immigrated to the United States, she indicated that she still remained hopeful that one day she would return to school and eventually gain employment as an accountant again. In the meantime, she felt satisfied being able to support Latina/o families in her current employment as an immigration consultant in her local community. “Es una posición que me a dado muchas cosas y hay mucho trabajo” [It is a position that has been rewarding coupled with there being a lot of work in this field], she added.

### **Javier**

As a former parent of Wonders Charter School, Javier was glad to return to campus to discuss his family’s experience. His son, Kiko, was now a freshman at an arts-focused LA Unified high school in Downtown Los Angeles, where he and various other alumni from Wonders Charter School (WCS) were able to gain admission through the district’s open enrollment process. Javier and his wife, Esther, were both natives of El Salvador who immigrated to the United States in the early 1980s. They settled in a Northeast Los Angeles neighborhood where they formed a family and raised their two children. Kiko was now 15 years old, and their daughter Susana is in her early 30s. As we began our conversation, he apologized that his wife Esther was unable to join us due to an unexpected conflict that emerged at the last minute.

“A mi esposa y a mí, siempre nos ha interesado el bienestar, el medio ambiente donde van a estudiar nuestros hijos” [For my wife and I, we have always been interested in the

wellbeing and the school environment where our children will be attending], he began. Kiko began attending Wonders Charter at the age of five as a kindergarten student, and remained there until he graduated the eighth grade.

The 18-year age difference between their children, Kiko and Susana, prompted Javier and Esther to rethink their options for school once Kiko was reaching the age to attend kindergarten. In the years since Susana had attended their local district elementary school, things had changed, and they no longer felt good about their two local district school options, “one was bad and the other was worse” he said. This led him and Esther to begin exploring schools outside of their local neighborhood. They first learned of charter schools through friends whose children were attending a charter school with music as its main focus. Although they did not ask much more about it, Javier shared he took mental note and enlisted daughter Susana’s help to research and help them find a charter school for Kiko. “Mi hija es muy envuelta, es facil para encontrar informacion. Es asi como tu, bien inteligente” [My daughter is really well connected, it is easy for her to find information. She is like you, very intelligent], he shared smilingly.

When prompted to discuss what attracted them to the school Javier shared:

Cuando comenzamos a traerlo, no había tantos alumnos y hemos visto la evolución y el crecimiento de esta escuela para bien. Y el crecimiento quiere decir que llamaron la atención al público . . . quiere decir que están haciendo un buen trabajo . . . están haciendo su trabajo. Y nosotros lo hemos notado. Hemos estado bien a gusto. Me gusta el espíritu que ustedes mantienen acá—de la principal o de ti, de los maestros, bien concienzudos, van al grano, y guardan también orden. Hay disciplina. Entonces, eso fue lo que nos atrajo.

When we started attending this school, there were not as many students and we have seen the evolution and growth of this school for the better. This growth means that you have caught the attention of the public, it means that you are doing a good job, you are doing your job. And we have noticed this. We have been very pleased. I like the spirit kept here by the principal and you, by the teachers, very

conscientious, direct, and you keep order. There is discipline. Therefore, that is what attracted us.

As the conversation continued, Javier was able to reflect upon their 9 years as parents at Wonders Charter. He discussed the importance of the campus environment and the way the school fostered students' development and growth, and lamented that more schools were not like it. Javier held WCS in very high regard and most appreciated the way staff and teachers made them feel like family. Beyond the care demonstrated by staff and teachers, he was pleased with the way he was kept informed of Kiko's learning and progress. When prompted about standout experiences, he expressed regret for not having been able to be more involved in the school. As the single income in the home, he shared that being able to help and support the school was something he wishes he could have done more of.

When prompted to think about the differences in experiences between Kiko's schooling and Susana's he started with three words, "abusos, discriminacion, y descuidos" [abuses, discrimination, and carelessness]. Javier proceeded to explain that his daughter Susana had several teachers during her elementary school years that were verbally abusive and mistreated her; unfortunately, they only learned of this years later when Susana was a graduate student. As he shared this, he expressed guilt and placed some blame on himself and his wife for not having known about it while it occurred. He then told of their experience the year Susana attended a school in a primarily White and affluent suburb in northern Los Angeles. During her kindergarten year at their local public school, Susana developed a new friendship with a classmate named Samantha. As the girls became friends, so did the four parents. Toward the end of the school year, they learned Samantha and her family would be relocating to a different part of town. Samantha's parents wanted Susana to transfer schools so the girls could attend first

grade together. Despite some initial hesitation, Javier and Esther agreed, and they drove Susana about 15 minutes every morning at 5:00 a.m. to drop her off at Samantha's home so they could attend school together.

Javier recalled that Susana and her friend Samantha were the only Latina students in their classroom. Although this stood out to him, he knew Susana liked being in class with Samantha and was reassured by the way she spoke about school and the learning she was demonstrating. However, this changed when report cards were issued and Susana and Samantha's grades were unsatisfactory. Confused and upset, Samantha's mother went to speak to the teacher, and during a brief observation noticed the way the girls were treated by their classroom teacher. It became evident the girls were victims of racial discrimination for being Latina. She took this to the principal who initiated an investigation that resulted in the dismissal of the teacher. For Javier, this experience was painful to retell, yet he found solace in knowing that Kiko had never had an experience like this throughout his years in school.

Javier shared he was born and lived in a rural area of El Salvador and was raised by his maternal grandmother. His mother had been a nanny to an expatriate family from the United States who insisted she join them when they returned to the United States. While she initially declined their invitation due to his birth, they insisted, and when Javier started school his mother came to the United States to continue working for the family; he remained in El Salvador with his grandmother. When asked about his own schooling, he described it as rough and difficult. "Yo estude en El Salvador hasta el noveno grado, y los maestros allá no son como acá, tiene mucho que ver la corrupción del país, hacen falta los valores morales, y los castigos eran rudos, eran físicos" [I went to school in El Salvador through the ninth grade and the teachers there are



not like the ones here, much of it is due to the corruption in the country, moral values are lacking and the punishments were crude, they were physical]. Javier recalled his years in school fondly; he shared that he was oftentimes sought out by classmates for his intelligence and skills in school. At the age of 18, Javier's mother sent for him to join her in the United States, just weeks after his arrival to the country, he found himself employed at a local factory where he was "the driver, janitor, shipping and receiving guy, delivery guy, everything they needed." While his initial experience as a worker was trying and tiring, he was encouraged and given a scholarship by his supervisor who allowed him the flexibility from work to go to earn certificates as a plumber and electrician at the local community college. Proudly, Javier shared the sacrifice and the challenge this placed on his family and the rewards he had been able to reap as a result of his own education, even as an adult.

### **Karina**

After nearly 17 years of working for others, Karina finally felt ready, and found a facility to house her own beauty salon. Despite its small size, she was proud and hopeful about this new opportunity and the success it may bring. Karina was in her late 30s and had emigrated from Mexico in the year 2000 at the age of 21. She, like many other participants in this study, left Mexico in search of better work and life opportunities. Now, 17 years later, she was witnessing her hard work pay off as she takes charge of her own future.

As we sat to converse, I learned a bit about her own educational journey, the pathway that led her to beauty school, and her eventual decision to immigrate to the United States, where a large part of her extended family resided. "A mi no se me dio la escuela" [school was challenging for me, it was just not for me], she said during our time together. Despite her

family's financial position and having attended private schools, she admitted school had always been a challenge for her. Her challenge, however, was not academic or because of the work requirements; she shared that she most struggled with the routine nature of school and the early morning routines of waking, dressing, and making sure she arrived on time every day. Karina completed the equivalent of the ninth grade in Mexico, and then went on to beauty school, where she gained knowledge and expertise in the areas of hair, nails, and skin care.

On the day we meet for the interview, her son Max was with her at work because he was on break from school and her usual babysitter was unavailable. Max is 7 years old, and was a second grader at Ruedas Charter School located in East Los Angeles, just a few miles from her workplace. As he sat quietly reading a book on his tablet, she and I discussed his educational trajectory. Although he was only in the second grade, this was Max's second school. He had attended a small Catholic school for kindergarten and first grade before she found and enrolled him at Ruedas Charter at the end of his first-grade year. Like several other participants, Karina's school selection process was influenced in part by the proximity and location of the school to her workplace.

Although she currently resided further east in a suburb of the San Gabriel Valley, for nearly 10 years she had been working in East Los Angeles where she had established a strong clientele. Bearing in mind the traffic in the area, she opted to find a school that was close to her work, rather than her home as she spent more time at work than at home; she wanted a school that was easily accessible to her throughout her workday. As we spoke, I asked about her initial decision to enroll Max at Our Lady of Fatima School. Without having ever attended U.S. schools herself, she was unfamiliar with her options and relied on extended family members to help her

make a decision. It was in those conversations that she learned Max would need to attend the local school nearest to their apartment; she found this troubling as she would be far from the school and thus began asking about private schools. She considered herself fortunate to have three aunts who each sent their children to Catholic schools, and thus began her search for a school where Max would attend kindergarten. In discussing what led her to decide attending Our Lady of Fatima, she pondered upon the question, and admitted it was the only school she visited and applied to.

As we discussed her experiences with schools, she admitted she felt best able to speak about her experience at Our Lady of Fatima, as Max has only been enrolled at Ruedas Charter for a few months. As she reflected upon the question, she indicated the recommendation from her aunts, proximity of the school to her work, and the tuition assistance offered by the school were the primary factors that led her to enroll at Our Lady of Fatima. Unlike other participants in this study, Karina did not have a particular incident or cause that led her to find a different for school for Max. “Era algo pues que ya tenía en mente pues no se, no me sentía muy conforme con la escuela . . . también se me estaba dificultando económicamente estar pagando mensualmente” [It was something that I had in mind already, because I was not fully satisfied with the school . . . and it was also becoming financially difficult making monthly tuition payments] were the reasons she named for leaving.

While her overall experience at the Catholic school was satisfactory, she had several memories that stood out which left her feeling unsettled. In her initial visit to the school, she recalled an office staff member was unwilling to allow her to complete the application and enrollment paperwork at home on her own time. She had to explain that she was on a break from

work and was unable to sit and complete all the required forms in the moment. After completing all paperwork and paying the enrollment deposit, she felt overwhelmed with the start of year parent meetings, orientations, and open houses, “Para mi que nunca lo habia llevado a la escuela, pues se me hacia asi como que mucho, no?” [Since I had never taken him to a school before, all of that felt like a lot for me, right?]. Despite these two instances, her most standout memory took place during parent-teacher conferences where she was given a series of complaints about Max’s behavior that led her to wonder if the school would be a good fit for him. Although those experiences primarily occurred in his first year at the school, they remained on her mind.

Like several other participants, Karina learned about the charter school by word of mouth; it was recommended to her by a long-time client of hers whose children attended the charter school as well. Despite not being at all familiar with charter schools, she felt compelled to explore this new school option that was near her workplace and did not have a residency requirement. As she spoke about her decision to enroll at the charter school, she listed several factors that influenced her decision—the availability of technology in every classroom, the relatively small number of students in the classroom, and the physical appearance of the school. Ruedas was located in a relatively new multistory building and was equipped with computers in every classroom for students to use throughout the day, Karina shared. This stood in contrast to Our Lady of Fatima, where students had access to a computer lab on an intermittent basis.

As part of our conversation, Karina asked for more information about the U.S. educational system which was for the most part foreign to her. Her first encounter with the U.S. educational system occurred when she arrived in the United States and attended the local adult school for some basic English courses. Despite having had English courses in Mexico, it had

been too many years without any practice and knew she would need it in order to establish herself and gain employment in the United States. In reflecting upon her own educational experience in comparison to that of her son, the level of expectations and workload were something she found different. “Algo que veo es que aqui en las escuelas Americanas, como que no hay tantas materias, y yo recuerdo que nosotros teníamos muchas materias y mucho trabajo tambien” [Something I notice about the U.S. schools is that there are not as many subjects, and I also recall that we had many subjects and a lot of work too]. The lack of a foreign language in Max’s elementary education also stood out as different for Karina, as English was part of the regular curriculum in Mexican schools in both the private and public setting.

As our conversation came to an end, Karina and I discussed teacher and school quality and the characteristics of a good teacher and good schools. She spoke about these through her current lens as a parent of a school-aged child; however, these were informed by her own educational experience. As characteristics of a good teacher, she listed patience, knowledge of how to teach, and an understanding of how students best learn. Patience she found important as she thought about Max, who was a very active boy who was oftentimes being asked to sit down, be still, and pay attention in class. Karina had an awareness that the teaching methods used in the classroom had an effect on students. She recalled the difficulty she had in school herself when her teachers would teach by writing on the blackboard and expect students to learn by copying the content onto their notebooks. Similarly, she wondered if Max was simply better at learning through movement or discussion rather than lecture.

Along with quality teachers, the availability of technology was noted by Karina as an indicator of a good school. Although Max was only 7 years old, he was much better versed in

technology than she was, she stated. Additionally, she was seeing evidence of this in just his first few months at Ruedas Charter. “Su tableta en la casa ya no nomas la usa para jugar como antes, ahora lo veo y esta leyendo o haciendo matematicas tambien y eso es importante para mi” [at home he not only uses his tablet just for playing games, but he now reads and does math as well and that is important to me], she concluded.

### **Maria**

Maria and I spent a considerable amount of time speaking about her son’s schooling and her own education in the home where she and her husband, Luis, raised their two sons. Maria was in her late 40s and had spent most of those years living in the United States. She was just 10 years old when she came to the United States with her family from Argentina. With her husband of 20 years, she had raised two sons, Charlie and Andrew. Charlie was a 24-year-old college graduate currently pursuing a new career in photography and video production; his younger brother, Andrew, was a 20-year-old junior at a regional state university in the Northwest on an athletic scholarship.

In similar manner as other participants, selecting a school for her sons was not a major consideration for Maria or her husband. When her oldest son, Charlie, turned 4, she enrolled him in a local preschool adjacent to their apartment before they relocated to a larger neighborhood, where he attended the local public elementary school. He attended that school through the end of his fifth grade; his younger brother, Andrew, attended the same school but was three grade levels behind him. This elementary school was not entirely unfamiliar to them; her husband grew up just a few blocks from the school and several of his nieces had also attended the school. At the end of Charlie’s fifth-grade year, they purchased a home and relocated to a more suburban

neighborhood further east, where he would start the new year in sixth grade and his younger brother, Andrew, in the third grade.

Moving to a new community meant new schools for both Charlie and Andrew. As Maria thought about what schools they would attend, she shared, “I didn’t really pay much attention to the schools because I figured they were better than where we were before. My concern was for Charlie who was starting middle school.” With only her prior experience as a guide, Maria enrolled her sons in the local district; unfortunately, given their age, they attended separate schools. As working parents, this posed a new challenge of having to drop off and pick up two children at different schools with different drop off and dismissal times. As she recalled their first year in school, she stated, “The schools were fine and all, but like I don’t know maybe I just had more expectations . . . the schools were just like really plain and basic.”

For years, both Charlie and Andrew had been avid athletes and played in a variety of sports teams and leagues. In conversations with other parents, Maria began hearing about Southern Charter Academy (SCA), a kindergarten-through-eighth-grade charter school in their neighborhood. Although she had heard of the school from other parents, she indicated that her own research and visit to the school ultimately led her to apply and enroll at the school. Since they were local residents of charter school, both boys were admitted to the school during their application period; Charlie started the seventh grade, and Andrew started the fifth grade.

As we discussed what about the charter school she found appealing, and her experiences with schools, both positive and negative, Maria had several memories that she spoke about in detail. “Having one single school for both of the boys was really nice for us . . . it made things so convenient and easy for us,” was the first reason she shared for having opted to enroll at SCA.

Additionally, the school's grade span through the eighth grade, and its extensive technology program with laptops and tablets in every classroom were elements she found appealing about the school. Like other participants, the opportunities for parents to be involved and connected to their children's education were positive elements of the school for Maria. "Although we were always busy with sports, there was always something for kids and parents to be involved in, and that part I liked a lot," she shared.

Despite enjoying these elements of the school, she detailed several incidents that she stated "bothered" her about the school. The first of these occurred during their second year at the charter school when she went to the school to inquire about the process for an extended absence for her sons. Maria explained the need for an extended absence, 8 school days, came as a result of a large family gathering in Mexico where her in-laws would be renewing their wedding vows. While she had hoped that advance notice of several months would be better, she felt frustrated and disappointed that her inquiry was met with disapproval from both the office staff and school principal. "I think they just could have been more understanding and maybe flexible with the request" was how she summarized the incident. Despite the school's position, they traveled to Mexico for the occasion.

The second instance led her to think at length about schooling, education, and the way in which education has shifted in the years since she was a student. Near the end of the second year of her sons attending the school, Maria obtained employment at the school as a receptionist. This new opportunity also allowed her to learn a lot about charter schools since, until 2 years prior, she had not heard of charter schools at all. Before she started working at the school, Maria noticed the significant emphasis and focus placed on students' performance on the standardized



tests they took each spring. “It was a really big deal, starting in January that was all that parents, teachers, students, everyone at the school talked about, just testing.” Maria explained that she learned from the school’s leadership about the importance testing had on the charter school; despite knowing this, she struggled with this focus, particularly as the parent of a child who was not a strong test taker. “Charlie, for example, he didn’t do good on those bubble tests. He always did bad on them and I don’t know why. But he was smart, he had good grades,” was how she described her personal conflict. She recalled feeling uneasy about the high level of importance placed on test scores, but balanced it against the other elements she found appealing about the school.

As the interview continued, I asked Maria to share about her own educational journey both in Argentina and in the United States. She began by saying she was about 9 or 10 years old when her parents opted to leave their home and life in Argentina and bring their three daughters to Southern California. “It was summer in California when we arrived, and I did not know the seasons were different. It was cold and rainy in Argentina because it was winter. But it was so hot here in California,” was one of the memories she has about her family’s arrival to the United States. Maria speculated that prospects for a better employment and life served as the impetus for her parents uprooting their family and coming to settle in the San Gabriel Valley more than 30 years ago.

“I don’t have many memories of school in Argentina, but do remember that the teachers were older women with gray hair, glasses, who always wore dresses . . . and they smoked in the lounge area. They smoked in the school,” she said smilingly as she recalled her few years in elementary school in Argentina. Additionally, she remembered the many rules and structures of

the school, and the manner in which her older sister would often be out of compliance with the school's uniform policy. However, her memories of school in the United States were not as pleasant. Since she was the youngest of her family, she went to a different school than her older sisters, which left her feeling alone. Lacking command of English furthered her feelings of loneliness, and despite help from a teacher in Spanish for her and other students in school, she noticed she was different from them as well. "I liked that I was able to understand someone in the school, but even that was hard because my accent was from Argentina and the tone and words she used and the words I used were different sometimes," she recounted. Language challenge aside, Maria successfully completed her primary and secondary education and went on to earn a high school diploma; upon graduation, she enrolled at a local community college where she took a series of classes but did not earn a degree or complete a certificate program.

As she pondered her own educational journey, she spoke about the difference between education when she was growing up and what her sons experienced. "I feel like now school is harder and there's more pressure. In high school, for the boys, it was always about what university they would attend, in my time it was always about just graduating high school." Of the many differences that she recalled, this was the one that most stood out for Maria. Fortunately, she stated, "They have both made it, Charlie is done with college and doing his own thing, and now Andrew gets to finish school and earn his degree and become a nurse like he's always dreamed of."

## **Nancy**

Nancy sat in her living room while her daughters got ready to go watch a movie at the local movie theatre with friends. She and her two daughters lived in a small home in Northeast

Los Angeles, about 7 miles north of where she grew up in East Los Angeles. Her daughters, Destiny and Ana, were both students at Advantage Charter, a local sixth-through-12th-grade charter school a few blocks away from their home. Nancy's parents left their native Mexico when she was just 3 years old, and settled in East Los Angeles in the early 1980s. Her parents resided in the same street and, despite not having lived in the community for nearly 15 years, it was still her neighborhood. As she spoke about her upbringing; she exclaimed, "My parents are still there. My friends are still there, its home for me, you know."

Nancy was in her late 30s and proudly spoke about her daughters; Ana was a 17-year-old senior, and Destiny is a 15-year-old sophomore, both at Advantage Charter. As a single mother of two daughters, she spoke about the future she wished for for her daughters. "They both talk about going to college and that is exciting for me. I didn't have the chance to do that and I want them to do it," she said. Before she could finish high school and graduate with her peers, she dropped out of school and later completed the requirements to earn a GED certificate. As an adult with daughters nearing their own journey into college, Nancy hinted at the notion of college as a possible future option for herself as well.

As she discussed her own education in comparison to that of her daughters, Nancy appeared somewhat lamentful. She was raised and attended the local public schools in her community alongside her two younger siblings, and their neighborhood friends. At the time she was a student, school options and choices were not very prevalent. "It was different back then, you just went to the local school or if your parents could afford it to the Catholic school and that was it." Nancy and her siblings attended the neighborhood elementary, middle, and high school, all part of the LA Unified School District. For her daughters, Advantage Charter was the third

school they had attended across the greater Los Angeles area due to housing issues that Nancy had faced across the years, which prevented her from settling into any one community for more than a few years. “I had to do what I had to do, you know? But I’m just glad that we’ve been here for a while and that we all like the school,” she shared.

Nancy’s eldest daughter started preschool at a local elementary school in a predominantly Latina/o neighborhood in the San Gabriel Valley, several miles east of the City of Los Angeles. Two years later, her younger daughter started the same preschool program at the same campus. As she thought about the school, there were not any standout moments or elements of it. “It was fine. Like it was just a little elementary school that was really close to the house we were renting, so it was like really easy for us and you know with two little kids, I needed that,” she shared. As a result of problems with her landlord, Nancy and her daughters relocated to South Los Angeles, where they lived for several years. Her daughters, Destiny and Ana, attended the local elementary school, which was also in close proximity to the apartment where they resided. Nancy had very little feedback or thoughts about the school, and spent some time thinking about why this was; she wondered:

You know until now that we’re having this talk, like I haven’t ever thought about those schools. They have just been the schools that the girls went to and that was it. I guess it’s like when I went to school, right. That was the school you went to and that’s it. End of story. Nothing more to it. I bet my parents feel the same way too if I ask them about the school me and my brothers went to.

The discussion and questioning led Nancy to intentionally think more about the topic, which in turn led to deeper conversations as the interview proceeded.

During the summer when Nancy and her daughters had relocated from South Los Angeles to Northeast Los Angeles, she was on medical disability, and therefore had more time to

spend with her daughters and get to know their new neighborhood. As they settled in, she befriended a neighbor, which was how she came to learn of the charter school. “Like she was this just nice señora and she told me the local schools weren’t that good, and told me about Advantage,” she recalled. While Nancy did not have an understanding of charter schools, she felt her neighbor was trustworthy and took her word and went to visit and learn about the charter school a few days later.

Since Nancy had not intentionally sought out a school for her daughters, she did not have any features that she felt were important from the onset—however she had come to like various aspects of the school. “I really like the school. I like that its small. I like that they have until the 12th grade. I like that they communicate a lot, and I like that they push going to college. Like a lot,” she said. Nancy continued and shared a specific experience that made her feel good about her choice to enroll her daughters there. Within their first year at the school, Nancy found herself challenged by Ana’s behavior and attitude at home; she had become unpleasant, distant, and disrespectful, and Nancy was uncertain of the shift as this was atypical behavior for her. She sought out the help of a counselor at school, and came to learn that Ana was significantly behind her grade-level peers. The school was able to provide her a counselor and tutor, which Nancy found vastly improved her behavior at home. “For me, the help they provided me at that time with her, was like huge. It also made me angry though, because her old school never told me she was so far behind.”

In discussing her thoughts about what was a good school, Nancy thought about the question for a few moments before she responded, “Well definitely good teachers. Good communication with parents, and that kids are learning.” This resonated in particular for Nancy,

who had learned her daughter Ana was not at par with her grade-level peers after enrolling at the charter school. Although she understood that schools varied in quality, she also spoke of the neighborhoods where she resided and attributed the lower quality of schools to being in “poor neighborhoods.” When prompted about the qualities of a good teacher, Nancy spoke about “understanding of student lives and problems, patience, and certificates and education to be a teacher.” Early on in their schooling, Nancy was advised by a teacher that her daughter would greatly benefit from spending more time with her playing and reading. As a single mother with just a high school diploma, Nancy lacked the time for this as she typically worked two jobs to meet financial obligations. She felt the teacher lacked the understanding that students and parents have quite different lives and do not always have the opportunity to play and read because they have to worry about paying rent and feeding their family.

As we concluded, Nancy spoke briefly about the way she felt charter schools were a better option for families. “They’re smaller, there are less kids, the teachers and staff are friendly and nice and they’re helpful,” she shared. In closing she stated, “I mean look, I did better than my parents did, so that my kids can do better for themselves in the future, and then that their kids do better than them and so on.”

### **Ofelia**

Ofelia spoke gratefully about the educational trajectory of her three daughters in the United States. Her three daughters were all born in the United States and, until recently, all attended public schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District near their home in Central Los Angeles. Her two oldest daughters, Nadia, age 31, and Patricia, age 26, were both college graduates with careers in their respective fields of study. Her youngest daughter, Jennifer, was a

16-year-old senior at a local charter high school operated by a charter management organization (CMO) just a few blocks from their home.

Ofelia timidly described her own educational experience in her native homeland of El Salvador. She stated,

Nadie me ha preguntado a mí de eso . . . pero mire pues las escuelas allá son muy pobres. No había muchos estudiantes tampoco. Recuerdo que habíamos estudiantes de diferentes edades en cada salón también. Me acuerdo que no siempre había luz y que toda la escuela había solo piso de tierra.

Nobody has ever asked me about this before . . . well schools there are very poor and there were not many students either. I remember the classrooms had students of different ages too, and I recall that we did not always have electricity. I also remember the floors of the school were all dirt floors.

She smiled as she recalled her own schooling experience in a coastal town of El Salvador where she and her family grew up. Like many others of her generation, Ofelia only attended elementary school before she went on to work to help support her family.

Ofelia and her husband left El Salvador in search of better life opportunities for themselves and their future family. Relying on their savings and blessings from family, they embarked on their journey to the land of opportunities in the United States and arrived in Los Angeles to meet family acquaintances who had left El Salvador several years earlier. “Nosotros llegamos y solo teníamos nuestra ropa y unos cuantos ahorros. Llegamos y a los poquitos días ya estábamos trabajando, gracias a Dios” [We arrived in the United States with just our clothing and some savings. Thanks to God, a few days later we were working], she shared. Thirty-five years after coming to the United States, Ofelia and her husband were able to afford their own home, see their two daughters graduate college, and they looked forward seeing their youngest daughter, Jennifer, complete high school and also attend college.

Unlike other participants, Ofelia did not have any particularly negative experiences in the traditional public schools her daughters attended. She admitted she was not very involved with their schools, primarily due to the language barrier she encountered in the school. Her three daughters attended a district-operated elementary school, then another district school for grades 6 through 12. This secondary school, was different than the typical middle and high schools found across the district, as it considered a choice school to which parents must apply. Both of Ofelia's older daughters attended and graduated from this school, while her youngest daughter only attended that school for grades 6 through 8.

As we discussed the reason for seeking a different school for her youngest daughter, Jennifer, Ofelia's primary reason was the close proximity of the school to their home. "Ya no quería yo que ella anduviera sola en el autobús, y acá ella se va caminando y pues eso me da más tranquilidad" [I did not want her to ride the bus by herself anymore, and now she can walk to school which puts me at ease], she shared. Although she had no complaints about the former school, when she was no longer able to secure a ride to and from school for Jennifer, she felt more uneasy knowing she would need to rely on public transportation daily. Like other participants of this study, Ofelia learned of the charter school from her longtime neighbor whose daughter had recently graduated from the school.

When asked about positive experiences with schools, a particular program stood out for Ofelia, which she considered to be life-changing. "No sé bien el nombre del programa, pero lo que resulto es de que al participar en él y terminarlo, les dieron una beca para la universidad" [I do not know the name of the program, but the result was that if they participated and finished the program they would receive a scholarship for college], she stated. To learn more of this program,



I spoke with her daughter who shared that it was an initiative of the school alongside various community organizations that would mentor, coach, and encourage students to do well in school, support them with tutoring, offer weekend and summer seminars and workshops—all tailored to encourage students to attend college. Students who participated in the 4-year program were given a full tuition scholarship to a college of their choice. Ofelia's oldest daughter attended a local state university in northern Los Angeles county, while her middle daughter attended a private university near their home in Central Los Angeles. Although Ofelia did not have a formal education beyond sixth grade, she was well aware of the high costs of attending college. "Con solo mi marido trabajando, como le íbamos hacer nosotros? Ese programa nos cambió la vida a todos pues nosotros no tenemos como pagar dos universidades, me entiende" [With just my husband's income, how were we going to make it? That program changed all of our lives because we did not have the means to pay for college for two], she said.

When asked to speak about the differences she noticed between the charter school and the traditional public school they attended, Ofelia spoke about the smaller size of the charter school and the behavior of students. Since the high school offered only grades nine through 12, it enrolled fewer students than the traditional public school they attended, which offered grades 6 through 12. This was a standout feature of the charter school that she liked because she believed there was a link between the number of students in a school and the behavior of students. "Dan menos problemas cuando hay menos muchachos en la escuela. Están así mas calmados acá, recuerdo de que en la otra escuela había mucha bulla en los pasillos y en esta no, yo no veo eso" [Students are less problematic where there are fewer of them in a school. They are calmer at this

school. I remember at the other school there was a lot of noise in the hallways and I do not see that at this school], she shared.

Like many other parents, Ofelia was grateful for the opportunities her daughters were given through education, particularly for her two older daughters, who were now successful in their respective careers. As she considered the future for her youngest daughter, Jennifer, Ofelia smiled knowing she had two role models in her older sisters who were guiding and encouraging her to also pursue her dreams of college.

### **Patty**

Patty's dissatisfaction with the education of her son in the traditional public school environment led her to find a different school environment for her son, Kevin. While the first years of Kevin's education at their local Los Angeles Unified elementary school were satisfactory, his fourth- and fifth-grade years at a different district were vastly different. For Patty, having found a school for her son to attend for his middle and high school years was a great relief.

Patty was a native of a small city in Southern Mexico near the Yucatan Peninsula, where she grew up with her parents, siblings, and extended family. She completed her primary education in the city, but was unable to continue her studies to pursue her dreams of becoming a nurse and had to relocate to the capital city of Merida, where she finished high school and earned a college degree in nursing. "Fue difícil dejar mi familia pero mis estudios y me futuro estaban por delante, así que fue el sacrificio que tuve que tomar" [It was difficult to leave my family behind, but my schooling and future were very important so it was a sacrifice I had to make], she stated with conviction. After working several years as a nurse, she sought a new opportunity and

left her homeland of Yucatan for the United States where she arrived and settled for nearly 20 years in the San Fernando Valley. While working a series of jobs, she learned English during night school, and then went on to take nursing courses at a local college that allowed her to validate her degree, earn the required certifications, and become a nurse. Now in her early 50s, Patty works as a registered nurse at a clinic near her home in the San Gabriel Valley.

As I learned about her experiences with her son Kevin's schooling, she spoke at length of several moments which stood out to her. Kevin attended their local public elementary school from kindergarten through third grade. Patty fondly recalled his kindergarten teacher, and stated, "La recuerdo mucho a Mrs. Ramirez. Era una señora ya mayor como de unos sesenta años y era tan tierna con los niños. Recuerdo su manera de hablarles, como les saludaba a diario por su nombre al entrar" [I remember Mrs. Ramirez well. She was older, in her 60s perhaps and she was so sweet and caring with the students. I remember the way she spoke to them, how she would welcome each one into the classroom by their name everyday]. The lasting impression this teacher had on Patty was evident, and she admitted that, all these years later, Kevin had never had a teacher quite like her.

Patty spoke of Kevin's first grade teacher, and named her as a very helpful individual who was able to guide her and help her obtain support for Kevin in school. Over the course of his kindergarten and first-grade years, she noticed he was not making strong academic progress; his report cards showed he was behind in some areas, and at home she would notice he had a hard time remembering things they were working on together. Her concern did not fade away, and asked for help from his teacher. Off the record, the teacher advised her to write a letter to the school requesting an evaluation for special education services, which initially Patty felt uneasy

about since she did not believe her son had a disability. Her discomfort was relieved when the teacher spent time with her describing the process of what this entailed and encouraging her to use this available resource to possibly provide her son Kevin with the learning support he may need. Two months later, Kevin began receiving specialized academic support and instruction, which she indicated had a tremendous impact on his learning and academic achievement.

Although she had to learn about special education and her son's learning challenges at their initial school, she found herself embattled with his teachers and school when they relocated to the San Gabriel Valley for a better work opportunity. She promptly enrolled Kevin at the local public school, but had several encounters that left her dissatisfied with the school. The school secretary, she shared, was unwelcoming and rude and looked down upon her and other parents who did not speak English well. She felt alienated and belittled, and things became progressively worse from there. She recalled the first day of school when parents were promptly escorted off campus just 5 minutes after the school day had begun; she and many other parents were in disbelief that they were being asked to exit the campus to allow classes to start. "En el primer día de clases, a mí eso se me hizo no se muy mal. Si fuera más adelante en el año, eso lo entiendo, pero no en el primer día" [To be asked to leave so soon on the first day of classes, that seems wrong to me, if it were later in the year I would understand, but not the first day of classes], she shared enthusiastically.

Patty's decision to leave the district school came as a result of 2 years of seeing her son Kevin struggle and not receive the academic support he required in accordance with his individual education plan (IEP). Patty became upset recalling the way his teacher, school principal, and other staff were not complying with the supports that were legally mandated for

them to comply with. When she felt she was being pushed aside by the school principal, she threatened to use her legal rights and file complaints against the school and district, which led the school to promptly act. Patty shared:

Yo tuve la dicha de ir a seminarios para padres con estudiantes que tienen IEP y aprendí como ser una voz para mi hijo. El yo tener que pelear así por eso para mí eso no me pareció nada bueno. Me dejó así muy mal sabor del director, de la especialista, y pues del distrito entero. Y bueno pues dado a esa experiencia yo no quede a gusto con la escuela ni con el distrito.

I was fortunate to have learned about advocating for my son and his learning needs through seminars and workshops I attended. I did not feel it was right that I had to fight for him to receive the support he needed. It was very unpleasant and it made me feel uneasy about the principal, learning specialists, and the whole district.

For Patty, this experience led her to lose trust in the school and eventually begin to seek out different school choices for her son.

Patty befriended another parent at the school who told her about the charter school her sons had attended for several years. She spoke to Patty about the teachers, whom she liked, the small classroom sizes, and the overall good feel of the campus. This piqued Patty's interest and she found the school and applied to it—but was unfortunately waitlisted. However, she learned of another charter school also nearby that offered a sixth- through 12th-grade option, and where her son Kevin has been attending for the past 6 years. As she spoke of the school, Patty shared her main appeal to the school were two things—the availability of special education services, and that it was not a district-operated school. Over the past 6 years, her Kevin had come to truly enjoy the different academic program offered at the school, which was unlike any school she had experienced before, she said. Patty was also extremely relieved that the school combined both middle and high school and would be able to support Kevin through high school.

As the interview concluded, Patty praised the way the educational system was able to offer families different choices and options. This was quite different than her experience in Mexico, as the government-operated public school was the only choice available in most places. She praised that there were individuals at schools who cared for students and teachers who were willing to go above and beyond to help students. In her opinion, not all schools were good and not all were bad; it was the teachers, leaders, and staff of a school that had made her and her son Kevin's experience memorable.

### **Themes Emerging from the Data**

This study sought to understand the factors Latina/o immigrant parents considered when selecting a charter school for their children to attend. In reviewing and analyzing the data obtained through 13 narrative interviews with participants of this study, four themes emerged from the data that address the research question of this study; these are:

1. The quest for educational opportunities reflects immigrant parents' beliefs about education as a pathway for social mobility. Participants spoke at length about the life they envisioned for themselves and for their children in the United States. This theme details the immigration journey of participants focused on the common elements of their experiences and stories as newcomers to the United States. In their own way, each participant detailed his or her goals and aspirations for their child's education. Through hard work and sacrifices, participants spoke about the way this would serve as a pathway to upward social and economic mobility. Given the intergroup diversity of participants, a profile of the participants who chose a charter school is described vis-à-vis their own educational attainment. Additionally, this profile of participants

describes the emergence of nativist language and attitudes by the participants of the study who all chose to attend a charter school toward parents who did not choose to seek and enroll at a charter school.

2. Immigrant parents know what constitutes a good education and the characteristics of a good school. As participants spoke about a good education, they indicated a number of different elements that extended beyond the traditional standardized measures of school quality. The importance of an ethic of care for students and their learning was primary among these, as was the moral and values-based learning they felt were present in the home and the school. Parents also described their indicators of good schools, which included a welcoming campus and environment, smaller schools and classrooms that allowed teachers to be aware of individual students and their needs, the visibility of school administrators, proximity to the home, a parent-friendly community, and staff who were communicative and spoke Spanish among others.
3. Active social networks lead to strong parental engagement and involvement in schools. As parents spoke of choosing a charter school, each of them spoke of his or her social networks as their connection to charter schools. These networks served the purpose of providing them access to the information that led to their eventual decision to enroll at a charter school. Through social networks, parents also found themselves actively engaged and involved in their children's schools and education.
4. Latina/o immigrant parents make meaning of the U.S. educational system. This theme focused on the participants and their own understandings and perceptions of school choice and the traditional public and charter school systems. It designates the primary

differences participants described when comparing their own educational experiences in contrast with that of their own children.

These themes emanated from analysis of the data and offer the most salient descriptors findings of the study as detailed by participants and the interview transcripts. The following section of the chapter contains a comprehensive explanation of each theme.

### **Theme 1: The Quest for Educational Opportunities Reflect Immigrant Parents' Beliefs About Education as a Pathway for Social Mobility**

Throughout the interviews conducted for this study, many participants spoke about the dreams, hopes, and aspirations they held for their children. As immigrants to the United States, parents spoke about their experiences navigating the educational system in the United States for their children and the possibilities for success and achievement they saw in it. Individually, they spoke about their journey in search of the American Dream of success in life and in their careers. Parents spoke eloquently about their own dreams, hopes, and aspirations not only for themselves, but also for their children as well.

This theme details the immigration experience for participants and their own journey in coming to the United States to begin a better life than what they knew in their native homelands. It contains participant's perspectives, values, and goals of education, followed by a description of the ways they envision education as a pathway to upward social and economic mobility. A profile of a group of participants is presented that also includes their thoughts about parents who do not choose a different educational environment for their children.

**Parents' immigration experience.** A salient element of this study was the experience participants had in their immigration from their native countries to the United States. As



participants spoke about their own journey to the United States, they focused on the availability of opportunities that were oftentimes lacking in their homelands. Despite their own educational attainment, gainful employment and career advancement opportunities were oftentimes a distant possibility.

For participants Betty and Cristian, who were natives of the same small town in Mexico, the impetus for leaving their parents, siblings, friends, and extended family was the lack of employment opportunities in their town. Tucked in the highlands of central Mexico, farming and agriculture were the only ways of surviving. As young, 17-year-olds, they relied on their faith, determination, and work ethic to guide them to a better future in the United States. They both endured hard work and countless sacrifices in exchange for the life they had worked arduously to create for themselves and their children. “La pobreza allá es demasiada, no hay mucho para salir adelante” [Poverty is rampant over there, there are not many ways of getting ahead], recounted Betty about their hometown.

Parents Gabby and Hector shared similar experiences of their journey coming to the United States. For them, their decision to seek out a better life in the United States was furthered by their two young children. Upon the birth of their second child, Gabby and Hector found themselves examining how they would best provide for their children with the low-paying jobs they held. Despite having some work experience and a job training certificate, Gabby knew she would need to find some way of advancing her career. At the encouragement of relatives in the United States, they took a leap of faith and came to Los Angeles, where a new life and better future awaited them. Nearly 20 years after their arrival, and with their children doing well in school, they indicated feeling satisfaction at the difficult decision to leave their native homeland

and seek a better life in the United States. Through hard work and perseverance, both Gabby and Hector were able to secure employments that allowed them to provide for them and their family in ways that would not have been possible in Mexico. Cristian elaborated on this by sharing:

No pues allá cuando íbamos a poder tener lo que tenemos aquí. Si, pues si teníamos trabajo y todo, pero no era así como aquí. Aquí de menos tenemos un buen sueldo, beneficios, vacaciones, y pues allá no eso no lo hubiéramos tenido.

Well, over there, we would not have had the things we have here. Yes, we did have work, but it was not like the work we have now. Here we have good wages, benefits, vacation time and in Mexico we would not have had all that.

Parent Javier's departure from El Salvador for the United States was coordinated and well arranged by his mother, who was already living in the United States. At the age of 5, Javier's mother left him at the care of his grandmother when she was offered legal residency status and employment as a live-in nanny for a family in the United States. Having worked for them for years before, she resumed her duties in the United States, and when Javier turned 18, summoned for him to join her in the United States. "Para mi pues fue fácil no como otras personas que se vienen para este país sin papeles; mi madre me pudo sacar una green card para venir acá" [For me, coming to the United States was easy. It was not like the journey of others who leave their homelands without legal documentation. My mother had secured a green card for me to join her in the United States], he shared.

Participants Diana and Isela both earned college degrees in business administration from their native countries and spoke about their initial aspirations for pursuing their careers in the United States. Isela shared, "Según yo, iba a llegar aquí a estudiar inglés y luego certificar mi título y seguir de contadora, pero pues llego la familia y ya, ahí quedo eso" [My plan was to arrive in the United States and learn English, then validate my degree and obtain employment as

an accountant. But then we started our family, and well that was placed on hold]. Isela's journey to the United States was different from that of other participants as she was born and raised near the United States-Mexico border. In her professional career, she indicated working at a maquiladora that had operations in both the United States and Mexico that led her to aspire to one day resuming employment in the firm. Isela immigrated to the United States in 2001, and indicated that her transition to the United States was easy and she never felt out of place; shortly after arriving in the United States, she met her husband, and several years later, her parents were able to join her and her family.

Several participants spoke about opportunity as a tangible item that was meant to be taken advantage of. Betty and Cristian shared the importance they place on rules and laws and how this has formed part of their children's upbringing. For them, this belief was grounded in their experience as immigrants to the United States who felt they needed to use the opportunity they had been given in this country and be productive members of their community. "Gracias a este país que nos ha acobijado" [Thanks to this country that has embraced us], he stated. Hector noted that the desire he and his wife Gabby had for improving their lives in the United States started by attending night school as recent arrivals from Mexico. Despite the difficulty this posed, they both went to several years of night school to further their English language skills.

Parents Eva, Flor, Maria, and Nancy had somewhat different immigration experiences than the majority of the parents interviewed for this study. Each of them was a young child when their parents left their native countries and immigrated to the United States, leaving behind extended family and their native homeland. Each of them were only able to speak very vaguely about the life they knew in their native land and had only minimal recollection of the little

education they experienced in their homelands. Participant Nancy spoke about her homeland not as a place in Mexico, but rather a place in Los Angeles. “My parents are still there. My friends are there. That’s always going to be home,” she said. Participant Maria, who arrived in the United States at the age of 10, was proud of her birthplace, but was only able to speak vaguely and distantly about life in Argentina.

**Parent goals, values, and perspectives of education.** An overarching topic that emerged across many interviews were the goals and aspirations parents have for their children. This surfaced in their stories of their children going to college; younger children being encouraged to do well in school so they may go to college; and discussions of the careers they envisioned for their children who were currently in school.

This was illustrated by parent Ana whose son, Alex, aspired to elected office, the way in which participant Eva’s own parents had an expectation she do well and stay out of trouble regardless of the school she attended, and even the reflection shared by parents Betty and Cristian about their eldest son, Anthony, who was now a first-year medical school student. In each instance, participants stated their desire for their children to have access to a better education than their own and be able to use this education to have a better life and future for themselves.

The best example of goals and aspirations was shared by parents Betty and Cristian who recounted a memory of their eldest son, Anthony. At the age of 6, the three of them were out on an evening stroll, and as they stood in a clearing and looked at the moon, the following exchange took place:

Hijo que quieres ser cuando seas grande?  
No sé, a lo mejor doctor o presidente

Ah que bien mi hijo, pues échale ganas y tú puedes.

Son what do you want to be when you grow up?

I'm not sure; maybe a doctor or president

That's great son, work hard and you can do it.

This anecdote shared by Betty and Cristian demonstrated the level of encouragement that each of the participants held and passed onto their children. In their own ways, each participant held a deep value for seeing their children achieve their dreams and goals through hard work and persistence.

Throughout the interviews, participants shared a great deal about the beliefs and values they held about the education they envisioned for their children. While each participant had particular elements they valued, the common elements across all participants were small school size, environments where their child feels happy and safe, a school that feels inviting and welcoming to parents and students, and a school that was communicative with parents—both by teachers and administrators.

Opportunity and a desire to do better were coupled with a sense of faith that was expressed by four interviewees. In different ways, each of them expressed gratitude to God for a number of different things. This included gratitude for having attended the charter school, for encountering a school that cared for their children, and even for the opportunity to have been able to enroll. Prayer and faith in God that their children would be admitted to the charter school of their choice was specifically discussed by Diana, who shared:

Me gustó mucho el trato que se nos dio al venir a la escuela, y le dije yo a mi esposo cuando la niña pueda voy a buscar a ver cómo puede ingresar . . . yo ore gracias a Dios que se me dio.

I liked the way I was treated when we came to the school, and I told my husband I would find a way to have our daughter enroll here . . . so I prayed and thank God we got in.

Parent Karina spoke about the value she found in having her young son Max attend a Catholic school before enrolling at their current charter school. She spoke about the ways in which she felt the faith-based education supported her own values as a Catholic parent. Although she was not particularly religious, she added, she enjoyed that the school was supporting her in providing Max a foundation of values and morals grounded in their Catholic faith. Participants Betty and Cristian shared a similar account of their eldest son, Anthony, who primarily attended Catholic schools for his schooling. “Les inculcan mucho la diferencia entre el bien y el mal, el temor a Dios, y el hacer bien hacia el projimo, y pues eso es importante para nosotros” [Students are taught about right and wrong, they develop an understanding of God, and the need to do good for others as well, and that is important to us as parents], they shared. Similarly, parent Javier indicated he was pleased with the way his son Kiko had acquired a strong moral education throughout his years of school. He and his wife Esther intentionally sought out a school that they felt would provide “un ambiente sano, libre de abusos y de drogas y del mal” [a healthy environment free from abuses, drugs, and bad influences]. These characteristics were important to his family also as part of their Christian faith.

**Schooling as a pathway to upward social and economic mobility.** As parents spoke about their goals and aspirations for their children’s education, a driving force in their interest were the benefits from the hard work and sacrifices endured during their educational trajectory. This sense of hard work in schooling as a pathway to success was articulated by several participants who spoke about future benefits and rewards.

Parents Ana and Betty each spoke about the future earnings potential when discussing their children's education. Ana spoke about her dream that her son Alex complete high school and pursue a career as an engineer so he can be financially successful. As the parent of a teenager, Ana was not always able to afford the items her son asked for: "El tiene gustos caros, y pues yo no se los puedo dar todo el tiempo" [He has expensive tastes, and I am not always able to provide these for him], Ana shared with slight sadness in her voice. As her only son, she lamented not having the financial means to comply with his requests. Thus, she continuously encouraged him to do well in school and succeed in college so he may be able to live the lifestyle he desired.

While rewards were discussed by some parents in terms of financial gains and wealth, parents Cristian and Javier discussed rewards in terms of the long-term quality of life. Both parents shared a vision that their children would not have to work as hard as they did now. Cristian wanted to provide until his children's dreams were accomplished and hoped that, in return, they would provide for their own families in the same way. Hector and Gabby discussed this same sentiment when speaking about their oldest daughter, Jasmine, as well. For them, they understood that the reward for her hard work in college was a better future. Participant Nancy alluded to this as well when she spoke of the future of her daughters, Destiny and Ana, if they pursued their college-going aspirations. With a sense of nostalgia in her voice, Nancy expressed, "I did better than my parents did, so that my kids can do better for themselves in the future, and then that their kids do better than them and so on."

Conversations about rewards and benefits of education were framed around the importance of hard work and sacrifices. In discussing the value of education and hard work,

mothers Ana and Betty had felt the need to instill the value of hard work and remind their sons that hard work and sacrifices are necessary in order to be successful. Ana indicated she had told her son, “No quiero nada que sea facil para ti” [I do not want anything that comes without hard work for you]. Parents Betty and Cristian shared their own story of hard work and sacrifices with their two eldest children, as a way of helping them understand their own need to do well in school and have a career that will afford them a better life and future. In the same manner, participant Javier expressed the ways he helped his 15-year-old son, Kiko, see the payoff of working hard in school by the example set by his older daughter, Susana. She had successfully earned her undergraduate and graduate degrees and had recently been promoted to supervisor at her place of employment. As a father, Javier found that having a direct example as a model for his son was critical because it was someone who was accessible and who could also help Kiko through high school and beyond.

**Profiles of immigrant parents who choose charter schools.** The data analysis process revealed patterns that resulted in a particular profile of the participants in this study. When examining the demographic characteristics of the participants, the following data points emerged, which provide an additional context about the parents who actively participated in the school choice process in this study: five participants were college graduates, three participants had some college/vocational education, two participants were high school graduates, and the remaining three participants had less than a high school education. In total, eight of the 13 participants, over 60%, were educated individuals, which likely influenced their decision to research and explore charter schools for their children. The educational attainment of participants provided additional context to the type of parent who chose to research and enroll their children



at a charter school. Parents' own educational experiences and values surrounding education is consistent with the extant research on this topic, which found that individuals with higher educational attainment were more likely to seek school choices beyond those available in their traditional public-school environments.

In sharing their stories and discussing their experiences, a significant amount of time was spent by the participants discussing elements that are best categorized as parent dispositions. In speaking about their dispositions of raising and educating children, various participants used language that implied a distinction among themselves as parents who chose to seek and attend a charter school and parents who remained in the traditional public-school system. Several participants shared strong opinions of parents of children who were attending traditional public schools. Nearly every participant in this study discussed the importance of parental involvement in their children's lives and education. They spoke of attending meetings, serving on the parent-teacher association, volunteering in classrooms, helping fundraise, participating in parent-teacher conferences, and attending classroom or campus activities as the ways in which they were involved. Betty and Cristian had always been involved in their children's school; just 3 months into the school year, they had met and knew the teachers and principal of their son's new school. For them, it was important that school staff and teachers knew them and knew that they cared about their son's education.

As participants spoke about their choice to attend a charter school, words and sentiments of nativism became evident. Knoll (2012) described the emergence of nativist attitudes and beliefs among the U.S. Latina/o population that mimic similar xenophobic attitudes and beliefs found among Anglo Americans toward Latina/os. He indicated that a primary reason for this

phenomenon was a relatively quick process of assimilation into mainstream U.S. society by immigrants. As this group of immigrants becomes further integrated into mainstream U.S. society, their perception of foreigner shifts and this identity is placed upon more recent newcomers to the United States. In several participant interviews, judgment and bias was expressed against parents who were not involved in their children's education. Parents spoke of themselves as choosers of charter schools in contrast with parents who did not choose a charter school for their children. Throughout these discussions, participants used terms and phrases resembling nativist and elitist attitudes, thus creating a distinction of us versus them. The sentiments of distinction among participants were shared and were not unique to any subset of parents; those with college degrees and those without any formal education both expressed negative thoughts about parents who did not choose a charter school for their children.

As a parent of three children, Flor's story of why she chose a charter school offered a glimpse into a nativist belief that was also expressed by other participants. In speaking about the local schools in her Northeast Los Angeles community, she mentioned, "Well you know, there's a lot of like immigrant kids who don't speak English, and I knew my kid wasn't going to fit in there with them." Flor's concern for her son was primarily because he did not speak Spanish very well. As a parent, she considered her son's place and ability to fit into the school environment as a non-Spanish speaking Latino, and opted for him to attend a more racially diverse charter school instead. Participant Diana spoke about "la clase de padres que estan alla y los que vienen aca" [the type of parents who attend the traditional public school and those who come here to the charter school]. Diana spoke of the careless physical appearance of parents at the traditional public school her daughter attended for preschool class as well as the disrespectful

manner in which they addressed their children. “No se ve bien eso, a mi y a mi esposo no nos gustaba eso” [It does not look right, and my husband and we did not like that], she shared when describing the parents at their former school. She further shared, “Me gusta el ambiente, se ve la clase de personas que vienen aca y todos bien educados y eso esta bien” [I like the atmosphere, you can see the type of persons who come here and they are all well-educated and that is good].

Participants also alluded to the way in which they perceived the families who chose to attend charter schools versus those who chose to remain in the traditional public-school system. Betty and Cristian spoke at length about this and discussed it in terms of their personal views on parenting and parent interest in their children. In their opinion, “Y me pregunto, ¿porque habrá papas quien no les importa?” [I ask myself, why some parents do not care about their children’s education?]. They both understood a need for involvement, and struggled with their own family members who chose not to be more active in their children’s education. Ana spoke about her fear her son would be exposed to drugs, bad influences, and sex. She passionately articulated her view:

Las personas son diferentes, porque en estas escuelas yo veo cómo trabajan los papas—los Americanos—le ponen mucha atención a sus hijos. No digo que las personas Latinas no lo hagan, pero los Latinos más nos preocupamos más con el dinero.

People are different because in these schools I see how parents work- the White parents- give their children a lot of attention. That is not to say that Latina/o people do not, but we worry more about money.

Being involved in schools was one component; being active and present in their children’s lives also emerged from participants as distinguishing characteristics of parents who chose and those who do not choose charter schools. Cristian told of a coworker who was upset with himself for having spent too many years focused on work and making money, and did not

spend more time with his son while growing up; his son had recently been arrested and was facing criminal charges. This resonated for Cristian in particular, because he understood firsthand the importance of balancing work and family since his father abandoned his family at a very young age. As a father, he was compelled to ensure he was present and focused on his children and made sure they, too, inherited that value. Similarly, Ana passionately spoke about this same topic, “Los Latinos nos preocupamos más por el dinero, el dinero, el dinero . . . trabajar, trabajar, trabajar” [Generally speaking, we Latina/os worry too much about money and work]. As the participants spoke about involvement in their children’s lives, they shared that their focus was fueled by their desire for their children to do well in school and in life.

As participants thought about their experiences at both traditional public schools and charter schools, they identified various points of comparison, which they spoke about during the interview process. Flor, Ana, Diana, and Eva spoke about the diversity of the charter schools they attended as something that stood out for them as vastly different from their traditional public school. In her Northeast Los Angeles neighborhood, Flor’s three children would have attended schools which had almost only Latina/o students. She pondered this and stated, “People grow when they’re in other settings that is not like them or traditional. LA is just a lot of culture and we wanted to open our kids to those settings . . . we didn’t want them cocooned in their own community.” She and her husband considered themselves “nontraditionalists and out-of-the-box people”; therefore, finding a school that supported these values was important for them. In their research and experiences with their neighborhood public schools, they found racial and ethnic diversity missing.

## **Theme 2: Immigrant Parents Know What Constitutes a Good Education and the Characteristics of a Good School**

As participants spoke about their children's education, they defined the elements they believed constituted a good education; these included a culture of care, a safe learning environment, meeting the specific learning needs of students, and the general behavior and quality of students. Although broad, these elements of a good education were further detailed when participants described the characteristics they believed defined a good school. The following theme details these two interconnected elements as described by the participants of this study.

**The elements of good education.** Elaborating upon a good or a quality education, parents spoke at length about several key elements: identification and support for students' learning needs, a culture of care, and support for student's social and emotional learning. These broad areas were named as important by participants and constituted their beliefs of a good education, regardless of whether this occurred at a charter school or a traditional public school. Each of these elements is detailed in the following section.

***Identification and care of students' learning needs.*** Participants Ana, Flor, Gabby, and Patty all spoke of the lack of academic support for their children as standout moments of their schooling experiences. As parents of children with learning disabilities, each parent indicated the newness of needing to learn about special education in schools. They spoke of their own learning that had to occur in order to understand the educational and legal requirements of receiving special education services. Despite the time and effort this required for them, each participant

spoke about the tremendous difference the support received in school had made in their child's life.

Even before each of their sons had been identified as having a learning disability, participants Ana, Flor, Gabby, and Patty struggled with receiving adequate support and help with their child's learning. Ana recalled the way her son was never provided assistance and support at their local public school even though his academic grades were at the lowest possible level. She spoke with teachers, counselors, and administrators at the school asking for her son to receive help. While she saw otherwise at home, her son was labeled lazy and the teachers and administration of the school were unwilling to see past their perspective. Ana felt frustrated and desperate and sought out a different school that would help her son and his learning. Within months of enrolling at a local charter school, he was evaluated and identified as needing special education services to access the curriculum. Until this diagnosis, she instinctively felt her son Alex was not lazy as he was being labeled but she lacked the knowledge to understand the challenges her son presented in school. She passionately stated, "Yo miraba la frustración de mi hijo hacia la tarea . . . siempre ha tratado de echarle ganas, y no se da por vencido" [I would see my son's frustration with his homework . . . he has always tried and he does not give up]. Once his learning disability was identified and academic supports were put in place, his academic performance improved significantly.

Parents Gabby and Hector had a similar experience with their youngest son, Eddie. He attended a traditional public school for kindergarten and first grade, and were also told he was not doing well in school, but were never informed about the special education assessments and services available to them. As parents of two older children, they had not experienced any

challenges or difficulties with them, thus they felt uncertain of what was happening and why their youngest son was not learning. In the same manner as parent Ana, their teachers did not inform them of their available options or resources and placed the responsibility on them as parents to further encourage him to work harder. Gabby and Hector's frustration and inability to support their son led them to seek out a charter school; in less than 1 year of attending the charter school, he was evaluated and identified as having a learning disability and provided a series of learning supports.

Participant Flor's experience was different because her son Eric was diagnosed with autism as a toddler and was evaluated and offered services even before he first enrolled in school. Despite this, she found herself needing to advocate for his needs when the special day class—a small learning environment provided by schools for students with certain types of disabilities was not meeting his academic and social development. Although he had a diagnosis, school administrators were unwilling to entertain her requests for examining his classroom placement since he was not making progress toward his individual learning goals. “So I told the principal, look my kid is being ignored here because he is high-functioning. I want to put him into general [classroom setting]. And it was really hard to transfer him, and so I had to fight a lot,” she stated. After several months and various meetings, she was able to have a change of placement for him to the general education classroom setting for the first grade.

The identification and support for students' learning needs and challenges was a strong emphasis shared in great detail by these parents. Other parents also discussed knowledge and learning as an essential function of education. Parents Gabby and Hector proudly spoke of their eldest son, who was now in medical school and taking advantage of the educational opportunities

available to him. For all parents, it was evident that content and academic success was an essential feature of a quality education.

*Culture of care.* As participants articulated their beliefs of a good education, a common element discussed was people—teachers, administrators, staff, and even students. For nearly all participants in this study, relationships emerged as the single most important element for them when identifying qualities of a good school. This included relationships with teachers, school staff, administrators, and even student-to-student relationships. Parents used descriptors such as helpful, caring, smiling, joyful, warm, and welcoming.

From her perspective as the parent of a 5-year-old student, Diana spoke at length about the ethic of care and love teachers have for their students as an important teacher characteristic. She described this, “Que le tenga mucha paciencia a los niños, el amor que se les vea de ella a los niños. Yo veo eso . . . el amor propio que tienen los maestros hacia los niños, y eso es todo para uno de madre” [A teacher who is very patient with her students, that the care she has for them be visible. I see the love that teachers have for their students and that is everything for me as a mother].

Parent Ana also shared a story of a standout teacher from her prior experience in the traditional public school; she said:

Tuvo una maestra mi hijo, una muy buena persona, muy linda persona, y yo la veo y la abrazo porque fue muy buena persona pero ella fue quien me dijo, sácalo de aquí, mételo a una charter porque aquí no le van ayudar a tu hijo.

My son had a teacher, a very good person, lovely person, and I still see her and I give her a hug because she was a good person. But it was she who told me, take him from here, put him in a charter because your son will not get the help he needs here in the district.



As Ana remembered this incident, she felt somewhat uneasy knowing that she was being told by a teacher at her local public school that the needs of her son with a learning disability were not going to be met. While that took place many years ago, in the moment, Ana recalled feeling dismayed with the district school, yet in reflecting upon it now, she felt glad to have received that unsolicited advice.

Participant Patty shared a fond memory of her son's kindergarten teacher at their local public school: "Era una señora mayor ya, tenía su pelo blanco, pero era la maestra más tierna que yo jamás he conocido" [She was an older teacher, her hair was all gray, but she has been the most endearing teacher I have ever met]. As Patty reminisced about this teacher, a sense of nostalgia could be heard in her voice, and it was evident she had not ever encountered a teacher that made such a lasting impression in the years since.

Participants also spoke of the office staff and administrators as a feature that attracted them to charter school. Diana recalled the treatment she received by an administrator when she came to inquire about the school for her 4-year-old daughter and how she felt she wanted her daughter to attend the school after that interaction. Parent Ana described a similar interaction and feeling the same way after speaking to the staff in the school office.

While further discussing their experiences, various participants spoke about the importance they felt for their children to like the school they were attending. Diana shared the way her 5-year-old daughter, Mari, eagerly got ready for school each day; Flor expressed a feeling of relief knowing that her son would fit in at the charter school, and parent Isela echoed similar sentiments for her daughters Mayra and Denise. For Ana and her son, Alex, this was particularly important because Alex had vocalized for several months a desire to leave his school

due to the challenging learning environment and little attention given to him and his learning needs.

As participants discussed schools, an underlying piece of these conversations was parents' experience in schools where they felt their children had received individual attention. Parent Karina spoke about the way her son Max's charter school teacher was able to provide substantial insight into his learning, his strengths, and areas for growth as well. Participant Javier spoke about this as well, when discussing the relationships that he and his son Kiko developed with teachers, other parents, and charter school staff. He shared, "En esta escuela nos conocen a nosotros, saben ustedes quien somos. Los maestros, la administración, todos ustedes nos conocen a mi hijo y mi familia y eso es muy bonito" [At this school they know us, from teachers to staff you know my son, you know my family and who we are and that is a great thing]. Participants also shared feeling students were cared for and supported in the smaller school environments they found in charter schools, which they highlighted as different from prior school experiences.

***Social and emotional support for students.*** In articulating their ambitions and perspectives of education for their children, several participants specifically spoke about education as more than the academic content knowledge typically associated with schooling. For several participants, they spoke of an education that encompassed manners, behavior, and values that were evident at home and reinforced in school.

The importance of this was eloquently shared by Eva, who spoke at length of the importance of having a school that supported children's social-emotional development and growth. She shared, "Having a space where they feel safe and supported in their social emotional development is also huge for me. Academics too, but really like just serving as a foundation."

She spoke about the importance she placed on having her son Julio be a part of a school that taught students how to converse and dialogue with peers and adults, offered tools to support conflict resolution, and allowed students the opportunity to learn from mistakes in a safe and supportive manner. “A quality school lets students have a space where they feel safe and supported in their social emotional development,” she stated. For Eva, this was grounded in her value as a parent and educator that students need to have foundational social skills before they can focus on the academic component of their education. Eventually, Eva found a charter school that was behaviorally more progressive than the traditional public-school system.

While Eva was the only participant who referred to social emotional development and learning by this particular name, other participants also alluded to the concepts embraced by schools that focus on this element. Parent Javier spoke about the manner his son Kiko learned about respect toward peers and adults during his time in school and the value he placed upon this as a parent. Participant Karina also referenced this in her conversation about the reason why she chose to enroll her son Max in a private school for his first years of school. Parent Flor spoke about the mission and philosophy of the school as important features that led her to select a charter school for oldest son, James. “He is a little bit of a visual learner, but he’s more hands on and we enjoyed that here a lot,” she stated. While this quotation was in reference to her eldest son, James, she alluded to this as considerations when she opted to enroll her two younger children at the same charter school as well.

Overall, parents in this study also valued the learning and knowledge that occurred outside of the academic content areas. Their description about student-teacher-adult

relationships, appropriate behaviors, respect, and manners suggest parents crave learning environments that model their homes and share common characteristics and values.

**Characteristics of a good school.** The elements that made up a good education were not stand-alone, but rather existed within the context of good schools. The interconnectedness of a good education and good schools was described with minimal distinction; however, participants were able to describe significantly more characteristics they believed were indicative of a good school. These included welcoming schools and learning environments, small school size, quality teachers, strong parent-school communication channels, Spanish-friendly staff, proximity to the home, and visibility of school administrators.

***Welcoming and safe learning environment.*** Participants shared in great detail the importance of a school environment that felt both welcoming and safe. Most participants detailed their experiences in feeling welcomed at the school and others spoke of the safety of the school, both physically and emotionally. The feel of the campus was an element of importance for many of the participants in this study; they spoke of this primarily in terms of a welcoming environment where students, parents, and staff were friendly, courteous, and appeared to genuinely enjoy their work in the school. Parents spoke about the sense of ease they felt when they initially came to the school and were greeted by smiling students and staff.

A common indicator of a good school for several parents was the feel of the campus. This was described by parents Javier and Diana as “el ambiente de la escuela” [the feel and environment of the school]. Javier and his wife were very mindful of the feel of the campus, for them it was important the campus feel wholesome “un ambiente sano, sin drogas, sin abusos” [a healthy environment, without drugs, without negative influences] is what they sought for their

son Kiko. For Javier and several others, a welcoming atmosphere was a strong indicator of a good school. Thinking about their initial decision to enroll at a charter school, Javier shared, “Nosotros vivimos en un lugar donde el medioambiente escolar es muy desordenado, entonces nos preocupaba encontrar una escuela que le brindara un medioambiente sano” [We live in an area where the school environment is very disorderly, this worried us and thus we had to find a school that would offer a better environment for our son].

Parents Betty and Cristian described feeling welcomed on campus by the office staff and other parents of the school. Despite not knowing each other, they felt welcomed and visible when they were greeted by parents and staff on campus. To them, the acknowledgement by other adults on campus was a welcome difference from their prior school experience. Several participants shared the feeling they received that students were cared for and supported at the charter school. These sentiments generated a sense of satisfaction among the participants, which they highlighted as different from their prior school experiences. For parents like Ana, Flor, Gabby, and Patty, this was particularly important as parents of a child with a learning disability. In their stories, they expressed a deep appreciation for the charter school for the level of support and encouragement their sons had each received, which stood in stark contrast to their experience in their traditional public school.

Even though several parents touched upon their command of the English language and felt it was an impediment most of the time, participants shared they felt welcome by the community of parents and teachers. For each of them, a smiling individual was a key component of their experience. While various participants indicated feeling welcome by parents, teachers, and staff, several pointed out the smiling faces of students on the campus as welcoming. The joy

students exhibited on the campus eased their anxieties and fears of being in a new environment, and reassured them of their decision to enroll and remain at the charter school.

Isela also spoke about the “ambiente” [environment or atmosphere] of the school in reference to both the physical campus and the feel of the campus. During her visit to the charter school her daughters attended, she enjoyed seeing the open and ample layout of the campus; additionally, she felt better knowing the campus was in single-story buildings that had no risks of stairs and second floors. Parent Eva felt strongly that students needed to have open space where they could play and run and be children. For her, having a dedicated playground and a grass field for students were additional indicators of good schools. In terms of other physical attributes of a good school, Flor, Diana, Ana, and Hector expressed a small school size as a marker of a good school.

Conversely, feeling unsafe or unwelcomed at school became key factors for some parents who sought out different learning environments. Parent Diana shared how her daughter came to dread going to school; participant Ana emotionally voiced how her son would plead that she find him another school because he did not like being at the local public school. Parents Hector and Gabby also shared that a family member had needed to move her children to a different school because her son was not receiving the academic or emotional support he needed.

***Small school size.*** Small school size surfaced as a common characteristic of a good school for nearly all participants. Although a few participants had attended U.S. schools, all participants indicated that their personal educational experience served as a frame of reference for size of school. In sharing their perspective, participants indicated schools in the United States

were far too large in terms of the number of students in each classroom and consequently the overall number of students in the school as well.

In their experiences, participants shared their dislike and dissatisfaction with the large school environments they encountered in schools. For parent Isela, the number of students in the kindergarten classrooms she toured at her local public school dissuaded her from enrolling her daughter there. Parents Betty and Cristian expressed relief when they were admitted to the charter school because they found the smaller classroom sizes more appealing for their children.

As participants discussed school size, they spoke not only about the number of students in classrooms, but also the overall number of students of the school and large physical campus as a negative element. The large number of students in the school was a particular consideration for Gabby and Hector, Ana, and Isela, all of whom had children who would be starting high school in the upcoming months. Gabby and Hector stated the large size of their traditional district high school was a cause of concern as they begin exploring their options for their eighth-grade son. Although their two older children had attended that same high school, the shyness and learning disability of their youngest son, Eddie, was a cause for concern if he were to attend a school of nearly 2,000 students. Parent Ana echoed this same sentiment, and indicated a strong preference for her son Alex to attend a charter high school rather than their local district high school. As a long-time parent of charter schools, she found the level of academic support offered to her son by teachers and staff to be invaluable to his progress and success in school.

Various parents, including Patty, Gabby and Hector, Isela, Javier, and Cristian, a major appeal for them was the grade span offered by the charter school. Having the convenience of a school that went through the eighth grade was an added benefit on top of the close proximity of

the school to their home. As parents of multiple children, they were familiar with the structure of their traditional public school which was organized by the grades of the elementary and middle schools. The availability of a single school where their children could remain through the eighth grade was a strong consideration in their selection process.

Although participants spoke about school size explicitly, the importance of school size emerged in the way parents found visibility for themselves and their children in schools; for many participants, their prior schools were spaces that felt unwelcoming and, in turn, made them feel invisible. Parents also detailed a series of experiences in schools that further alienated them and made them feel neglected and disregarded—this included mistreatment by teachers and administrators and incidents they deemed as discriminatory. Overall, these experiences served as the impetus for participants to seek different schools for their children. Finally, participants shared the ways in which smaller schools and smaller classrooms served as pivotal supports for their children with learning challenges.

***Quality teachers.*** In discussing their experiences in schools, participants spoke at great length of the characteristics of good schools and good teachers. In their conversations, they highlighted qualities and traits they felt were indicators of a good school and a good teacher.

Every participant indicated the teachers of their children as a particularly significant element of their experience. They spoke about the level of care for their children, the preparedness they demonstrated in their craft, their professionalism, the love and compassion they had for children, their accessibility to parents, and their ability to create a good classroom environment as important. Parent Diana spoke of the caring nature and demeanor of her



daughters' classroom teacher and teacher assistant as being extremely important for her and her husband.

With nearly every participant in this study, relationships emerged as the single most important element when identifying qualities of a good school. Parent Betty discussed her relationship with her son's teachers as a highlight of their time at their local public school. From kindergarten through fifth grade, her son Bobby attended their neighborhood school, where she felt she had an overall positive experience. The teachers he was assigned to throughout his 6 years were pleasant, and both she and her husband, Cristian, felt were supportive of him as a learner and of them as parents as well. The relationship parents, teachers, and students were able to cultivate was very important to several participants. Betty alluded to this when she indicated she would miss her daughter's teacher of 3 years; she laughed as she shared that her youngest daughter, Carol, was oftentimes more compliant with her teacher than with her as the parent. Flor also asserted that the relationships she and her children formed with teachers and staff at the charter school were what most stood out to her.

In their individual stories, parents spent a significant amount of time detailing the traits and qualities that they believed were important for teachers. Isela spoke of the preparedness to teach as an important characteristic. This meant, "Que no llegue en la mañana a ver que va a enseñar . . . que ya sepa desde hace unos días antes y tenga su lección preparada" [A teacher that does not arrive in the morning to figure out what they will teach . . . that they know a few days in advance and has their lesson prepared]. She also felt it was important for a teacher to be mindful of all the students in their classroom, not just few who were always raising their hands. Ana also stated teacher preparation in terms of their knowledge of working with students as important to

her. In her interview, Diana mentioned professionalism as a characteristic she found important. Hector and Ofelia were the only participants who made mention of teacher credentials and certifications as characteristics of a good teacher.

Eva, Flor, and Isela expressed that good teachers were aware of the different type of learners and students in their classrooms. Each of them named specific teachers who, in their experience, exhibited this trait. They identified knowing how to motivate students, how to keep them interested, and knowing how to support and challenge students as important characteristics. Javier reiterated this in saying, “La atención que presta a las necesidades de sus alumnos, por ejemplo para mí un maestro es el líder de sus estudiantes en su clase. La maestra o maestro ve las necesidades y sus habilidades y donde está flaqueando” [The attention a teacher pays to the needs of their students, a teacher is the leader of their students in their classroom. The teacher sees the needs and their abilities as well as their areas for improvement]. To Eva, a good teacher was one “who is intuitive about her students . . . one who sets the tone and challenges academically but also provides a safe space for learning.”

Eva further stated, “Our most positive years in school have come down to the teacher connection with my son.” Gabby and Hector also felt the quality of a school’s teachers mattered in making a quality school. Hector named various teachers he and Gabby had established rapport with and the way in which the teachers’ dedication to their son offered them reassurance of the quality of the school. Ana also named various teachers whom she felt had been important in furthering her son’s education; conversely, she cited the quality of the teachers at her traditional public school as a major reason why she chose to leave.

*Strong parent-school communication.* Another common value participants shared about a good school was communication between the school and parents, which included teacher to parent communication, and administration to parent communications. The participants indicated their desire to feel included and well informed in the happenings of their child's education. "El maestro cuando nos veía nos decía como iba, y no todo era mal y eso es importante" [The teacher would tell us how our son was doing when he would see us and not everything he shared with us was bad, and that is important], was how Hector described his experience. Parent Nancy, candidly spoke about how much she enjoyed receiving text messages on her mobile phone informing her of the happenings of the school. "I mean, yes, I have an email, but I like the text messages better. They're easier for me to read, and then to find out more, I click and that's it," she said. The quick format of text messages were a welcome feature that enabled her to remain informed and engaged in her daughter's school.

Participants Isela, Gabby, Hector, Ana, and Javier named teacher-parent communication as an important characteristic of a good school and a good teacher. Gabby and Hector spoke about the importance they felt that teachers not only communicate when problems arose, but also when students were doing well. Unlike Wonders Charter, their prior school's communications were focused on misbehaviors or areas where the teacher was requesting help to correct a problem. While they liked being informed of these issues, they stated that a positive communication would have been well received. Isela echoed this same sentiment and recounted the confidence she felt when she would receive compliments about her daughters from their teachers.

***Spanish-friendly staff.*** When describing good schools, participants shared the value they placed on being able to communicate with school staff in Spanish. “El hecho que hablaban español, nos inspiró mucha confianza” [The fact someone spoke Spanish inspired confidence in the school for us], shared Gabby and Hector. In the two prior schools their sons had attended, there had not been Spanish-speaking staff readily available to communicate with them. For many participants, the availability of Spanish-speaking staff members was a positive feature of the charter school they attended. Parents shared that these staff members became their primary points of contact with the school as they were able to better communicate in their native Spanish language.

As parents spoke about Spanish-speaking staff at the school, it was mentioned that having a teacher who spoke Spanish would have been an added benefit, but did not carry the same level of value to them. Parent Ofelia mentioned, “Si la maestra habla español, que Bueno pero para mí alguien en la oficina y quien me pueda traducir es más importante porque ellos no cambian cada año como los maestros” [If the teacher speaks Spanish, that is great, however for me it is more important that there be someone in the office who can translate. That is more important to me because they do not change every year as do the teachers].

***Proximity to the home.*** Nearly every participant of the study indicated the convenience of location of the school as an appealing feature of the charter school they attended. Each parent resided within somewhat close proximity to the school, and therefore the convenience of not needing to worry about student drop-off and pick-up was seen as a positive aspect of the school.

Parent Karina spoke of the convenience of the charter school her son Max attended and the benefit that the charter school he attended does not have a neighborhood residency

requirement as do traditional public schools. As a working single mother, she was relieved to know she had other school options close to her place of employment. For parents Gabby and Hector, the prior charter school their son attended was 20 minutes away from their home; thus, being able to have their sons attend a school that was just 5 minutes away from home was a major draw. Parents Isela, Patty, and Ofelia all spoke about the close proximity of the charter school to their home as an attractive feature of the charter school as well. Ofelia stated, “Yo no quería que ella anduviera en el autobús sola, y pues acá en esta escuela ella se puede ir caminando y me siento mejor de que ella esta aqui cerca de la casa” [I did not want her to be riding the bus to school by herself. She can now walk to school and I feel better knowing she is close to home].

While the location of the school was an important consideration for nearly every parent, parents Eva, Flor, Gabby, and Hector alluded to the sacrifices they were willing to make for their children to attend a good quality school. In each of their stories, they spoke of driving across several cities to reach the school their children attended; however, they felt the quality of the school was a more important factor than its proximity to the home.

***Visibility of school administrators.*** An additional indicator of a good school was the visibility of school administrators. Several participants spoke in detail about the importance they placed in seeing administrators on the campus, and at functions and events.

Parents shared that seeing the school principal greet children, visiting classrooms, participating in events and activities across the campus were important to them. Parent Ana commented, “Le tengo mucho agradecimiento de verdad, porque cuando yo he necesitado hablar con alguien, siempre me han puesto atención” [I am truly very grateful because when I have

needed to speak with someone, they have always been available and paid attention to me].

Similar sentiments were shared by parents Gabby and Hector as well as Betty and Cristian, who expressed an appreciation for having a Spanish-speaking administrator whom they could readily contact if they ever had any concerns.

For parents Betty and Cristian, the consistent presence of the charter school principal stood out to them as a point of difference from their prior school experiences. Cristian shared, “En la otra escuela yo le puedo contar cuantas veces me tocó ver a la directora, como unas cuatro. Y estuvimos ahí varios años. En cambio aquí, la vemos casi a diario y pues eso nos hace sentir bien” [At the other school our children attended, we seldom saw the principal. I can recall about four times that we saw her. However, here (at the charter school), we see the principal nearly daily and that makes us feel good].

Parent Isela spoke about the presence and leadership of the school administration as an indicator of a good school as well. She shared, “Las personas que están a la cabeza de la escuela. Importa que vean por la escuela y no nomás por el puesto que tienen” [The leadership of the school, that they look out for the whole school not just the role/position they hold is important].

### **Theme 3: The Power of Parents’ Social Networks and Active Engagement in Schools**

Parents who researched, selected, and chose to attend a school other than their locally assigned traditional public school had a unifying characteristic—they were actively involved and engaged in their child’s education. The participants of this study all engaged in the school search process for a variety of different reasons yet were proactive in seeking an alternative school environment that would better meet their needs and the needs of their children. This theme presents the evidence of participants’ social capital and networks that led them to charter

schools. As newcomers to the United States, most participants spent time learning about the different educational options available, which included traditional public schools, charter schools, and private schools. This theme also presents the ways parents were engaged in their child's education, the connection of school choice as a form of parental engagement, and the ways in which parents participated in schools.

**Powerful social networks.** The ways participants learned of charter schools varied, yet all shared a common element: parent's social networks. Every study participant except Flor named an individual as their contact to the concept of charter schools. This person was a neighbor, friend, acquaintance, or family relative. In some instances, the relationship between them was not well developed, whereas for others, these were individuals they trusted and with whom they had an established rapport. These connections highlight parents' use of social networks and social capital and the way these were activated and utilized to inform their school choice process.

Although parent Javier had experienced the traditional public-school system when his older daughter Susana was a student in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he and his wife learned about charter schools through a friend. He shared:

Cuando mi hijo ya tenía que ir a la escuela, estábamos preocupados. De las escuelas cercanas una esta mala y la otra está peor. Y en estar buscando, por medio de unas amistades nos dimos cuenta que sus hijos estaban en una charter school y ahí nació nuestro interés por buscar una charter.

When my son had to go to school, we were worried. Of the nearby schools, one was bad and the other was worse. In looking, by way of friends we learned their children were at a charter school and that piqued our interest in finding a charter school.

Javier's children, Susana and Kiko, were 18 years apart in age and had no overlap in schooling; Susana was a college student by the time Kiko started kindergarten, which was a reason why they found themselves exploring school options. Javier noted the charter school his friends attended was a music-focused school, which he found appealing. It was his daughter Susana, however, who helped them research schools online, which eventually led them to find the charter school his son attended.

Parent Isela learned of charter schools when she encountered a passerby driving on her street who was searching for a home in the neighborhood. That person approached her to ask about the neighborhood, and in their discussions, Isela learned the person was hoping to move into the neighborhood so her children could attend the local charter school. Although Isela had seen the charter school while driving in her neighborhood, she had never thought about it as a school that would lead families to relocate. After that conversation, Isela found herself much more curious about the school and began exploring and researching it with greater interest. This prompted her and her husband to tour the school and learn more about it while their daughter was just 3 years old.

Gabby, Hector, and Ana's connector to charter schools shared a different characteristic—they were individuals whom they knew from the school their children were attending at the time. Although they did not have a strong rapport with them, the recommendation to look for a charter school was enough to have them take action and learn about this new option. In each of their cases, the recommendation took place at a time when they were already dissatisfied with the traditional public school they attended; therefore, the recommendation further prompted them to take action. Participant Ana thought back about the instance when she was told about a charter



school on the day her son's school was shut down unexpectedly, and said, "Aun la veo y le digo gracias—yo nunca voy a dejar de darle las gracias porque gracias a lo que usted me dijo, mi hijo esta en una charter" [I still see her and I say thank you—I'll never stop thanking you because thanks to what you told me, my son is at a charter school]. This acquaintance of Ana led her to the charter school where her son had been enrolled for the past 4 years.

Parents Nancy and Ofelia both learned of the charter school from their neighbor whose children had attended it. Ofelia had known her neighbor for several years and was aware that her children attended the charter school. Nancy, on the other hand, was new to her neighborhood and heeded the advice of her neighbor to avoid the local public school and opt for the neighborhood charter school instead. "I don't know I think I just trusted her word and went for it," said Nancy in reference to why she took her new neighbor's advice. Parent Karina cited that a client at her workplace referred her to the charter school where her son Max was enrolled.

Despite not being familiar with charter schools, nearly every participant trusted the advice and words of another and made the decision to enroll at a charter school. The level of trust placed on the word of these individuals showcases the power of parents' social network. Through these social connections, participants were able to find schools, which they indicated were better options for them and their children. This extended beyond the simple notion of a new school as participants went on to learn about and eventually enroll at an entirely new type of educational environment: charter schools.

**Active parent engagement.** When participants spoke about their interactions and connections to their children's education, a significant number of parents spoke about their involvement and engagement in the schools their children attended. For some parents, this took a

very active form via membership or leadership in the school's parent-teacher association, volunteering in the classroom, or serving on school committees. Others spoke of the goals, aspirations, and less proactive ways in which they valued and participated in their children's education.

Parent Ana spoke about her involvement as committee member, secretary, and later president of the parent-teacher association at her son's school. As the parent of an only child, Ana felt it was important for her to be involved in her son's school and, while her English language skills were minimal, she was able to be involved and engaged in a manner that felt good to her. Ana recalled, "Era importante para mí que yo estuviera allá en la escuela ayudando y en los comités que había. Yo no trabajaba en aquella época, así que no era difícil para mí" [It was important for me to be at the school helping or being on the committees of the school. At that time, I did not work, therefore it was not difficult for me to be involved]. Parents Betty and Cristian also spoke about prioritizing their children's education and spent considerable time in the schools their children attended. As parents of a son in high school and a daughter in elementary school, they discussed the importance they placed on their older son and his transition into high school. This was detailed as:

La high school pues es una escuela nueva para nosotros, entonces hemos pasado mas tiempo alla. Nos hemos presentado a sus maestros, su coach de soccer, y hasta con el director de la escuela. Para nosotros eso es importante porque queremos que sepan que nos importa su educación y que estamos disponibles para el y para la escuela también.

High school is a new school for us, so we have spent more time there than at our daughter's school. We have gone to meet his teachers, his soccer coach, and even the school principal. That is important for us to do because we want them to know that we care about his education and that we are available to him and to the school as well.

The value participants placed on being connected and engaged in their children's schools emerged as a salient element that speaks to their connection and support for their children's education.

**Active parent engagement and the search for schools.** While parental engagement was described by each of the participants, their engagement in their children's education was tangibly demonstrated through the school search and selection process. In every instance, participants spent considerable time and efforts researching, learning about, and eventually enrolling their children at a charter school. Active engagement that results in the identification and enrollment in an intentionally selected school can be considered the ultimate form of parental engagement.

Even before choosing to select a charter school for their children to attend, several participants indicated the ways they were engaged in their children's education. The parents in this study, however, faced experiences that ultimately led them to take proactive action and find a better school for their children. The search for a better school was a common finding for 10 of the 13 participants in the study. When participants recalled their experiences with the different schools their children had attended, several identified an instance that pushed them to begin thinking about finding a new school for their children. These moments were pivotal in their school experiences as they signaled a clear message that led them to feel the school as not the place for them or their children. For other parents, these moments reaffirmed previous thoughts about the adequacy of the school they currently attended and led them to proactively begin a search for a different school option.

Participant Flor spoke about an interaction with the school principal, who berated her for wanting to transfer her son from the traditional public school to a charter school. After 2 years at

the school, she felt discontent with the way her son's needs were being addressed. She was asking for her son to be retained in first grade in order for him to mature more and be better prepared to be in class with his peers; Eric's autism and intensive therapies and supports had only minimal effect on his overall learning. The outright refusal by the school to consider her request, led her to explore her options at the charter school where her older daughter Sara was enrolled. When she informed Eric's principal of her thoughts to enroll him at the charter school, he expressed his distrust of charter schools. "He told me charter schools don't last . . . they're going to close it on you and you'll be back . . . I guarantee you'll be back because that charter school is going to close down," she recounted. This served as her final interaction with the traditional public school system.

Diana's decision to leave the traditional public school system stemmed from physical altercations her daughter had suffered in the preschool program she attended at their local elementary school. On several occasions, her 4-year-old daughter, Mari, came home with scrapes and bruises that left her uneasy about the level of supervision in the program. In addition, Mari would tell her of interactions with several students whom she felt were targeting her. She recalled, "Habían dos niños que me la molestaban y una vez un niño me la golpeo con un lápiz en la piernita . . . ese niño me la había agarrado de que siempre era a ella que la golpeaba" [There were two boys who would bother her and one time he hurt her with a pencil in her leg . . . that boy had it out for my daughter and would always target her]. This specific incident prompted her to speak with the program director, who did very little to address her concern. He brushed her off and told her those things happened and there was nothing that he could do to stop the children

from hurting each other. His lack of action and response to her concerns led her to withdraw her daughter from the program and file a complaint that went unattended.

Participants Patty and Ana both spoke at length about the inadequacy of the academic and social support their sons were receiving at their traditional public school as the primary reason they chose to leave their district schools. As parents of students with learning disabilities, they both had an understanding of the requirements for their children to receive appropriate academic support in school. Despite the legal requirement of this, both Ana and Patty spoke of instances where they had to spend considerable time at the school site ensuring their children were receiving the necessary supports and accommodations to ensure their academic progress. After several negative interactions with teachers and their respective school principals, Ana and Patty felt it would be best if they found a school where the learning needs of their children could be better met.

Parent Eva spoke at length about the rigidity of her traditional public school and the way their policies and procedures hindered her from feeling welcome on campus. “It was rough, the school was very rigid in a lot of ways, and that was rough for my son . . . it just didn’t feel welcoming,” she recalled thoughtfully. For Eva and her son, Julio, being able to transition into the classroom was a gradual process that was not possible at their traditional public school. She stated, “I caught the eye of the administration and was being watched” she recalled smilingly. While she understood that campuses needed to be safe and secure, she found the administration’s lack of flexibility in this area problematic. I understand safety concerns and all that, but I think kicking parents out is not okay.” This sense of rigidity at the traditional public school was echoed by various other participants who had similar encounters.

Betty spoke of a negative experience she had had in a traditional public school as a classroom aide, not as a parent. She remembered, “Cuando entraba al salón, las maestras se decían, ay ese niño me tiene hasta aquí . . . y la mama es una esto y el otro” [When I would walk into classrooms, the teachers would be telling each other, I’ve had it with that child . . . and the mother is just as bad to deal with]. Hearing their complaints changed her view of the teachers as their words were unprofessional and, regardless of a child’s behavior or a parenting style, everyone deserved to be respected, indicated Betty. Participant Isela shared that her negative experience at the traditional public school happened while she was a classroom aide at a middle school. Students were very badly behaved, loud, and disrespectful, and there were so many of them that it was hard for the teacher to manage them, she explained. Both Isela and Betty only spent a short period of time working in the traditional school system due to what they felt were inadequate professional behaviors by teachers and staff.

Although these moments were significant enough to prompt a change of school, several parents expressed that their decision to leave the traditional public school was more practical. Betty and Cristian chose to leave their traditional public school because the charter school was closer to their home and therefore more convenient. Ofelia also spoke to the distance and the need for her youngest daughter to travel via public transportation as a factor in her decision to change schools. The charter school her daughter now attended was within walking distance to their home. For parents Isela and Javier, their children had only ever attended the charter school; thus, a departure was never experienced. Karina, whose son Max had previously attended a Catholic school, expressed that the financial obligations of tuition was a major influence in her decision to seek out a different school.

**Active parent engagement in school life.** All participants in this study shared the characteristic of selecting and enrolling in a charter school, which can be considered the ultimate form of parental engagement. Beyond this, however, participants spoke about their engagement in other elements of their child's education that are equally important.

Parent engagement and participation in school life looked different for each participant. Several parents, like Flor, Eva, and Patricia, felt engaged in their children's education through their interaction with their children's teacher. They spoke about the communication they had with their child's teacher as important and felt connected to the school through the teacher. Participation and being informed of the happenings in the classroom, parent-teacher conferences, and other classroom-related activities served as their connection to their child's education. In this manner, parental engagement is directly related to the happenings of the classroom.

Parent Ana spoke about her active engagement in her son's education through her participation and leadership on several school committees. These included the parent-teacher association (PTA) and the school's English Language Advisory Council (ELAC), which provided advisory oversight in the education of students who were second language learners. As a stay-at-home parent, Ana found herself with an abundance of time that allowed her to be involved in the school. Through this involvement, she became familiar with many other parents, and developed strong connections to her son's teachers and school staff.

Other parents discussed their engagement in their children's education through more traditional channels: parent-teacher organizations, committees, fundraisers, and campus events and activities. Betty and Cristian specifically spoke about a campus event that celebrated literacy and the author Dr. Seuss. They recalled smilingly the excitement of their daughter during the

daylong celebration of Dr. Seuss-themed activities. They found this campus-wide event was a great way to build community in a manner that welcomed all parents and allowed them to get to meet other parents in the school.

Participant Nancy spoke about the way she felt connected and involved in the high school events and activities hosted by her daughters' high school. Since the school had college going as a significant focus of its program, Nancy shared that she regularly attended seminars and workshops that provided students and parents with information about college. She found that these opportunities were a valuable offering of the school, and therefore, she made the effort to attend and learn alongside her daughters when these were offered. Through the process of learning about college with her daughters, Nancy admitted she, too, had begun thinking about her own future and wondered if college could possibly be an option for her as well.

#### **Theme 4: Latina/o Immigrant Parents Make Meaning of the U.S. Educational System**

As participants shared their thoughts and perspectives about education, they spoke about the U.S. educational system vis-à-vis their experiences as parents and, for some, in their own experiences as students. Participants spoke candidly about the newness of charter schools and the ways they found themselves needing to learn about and come to trust a new system that was unfamiliar to them. Several parents spoke about the rumors and misconceptions they had heard about charter schools from friends and acquaintances and their need to dispel these through personal experience. Participants reflected upon the differences in the rigor of schooling in the United States and in their homelands; this topic was touched upon by most participants of the study. Several parents noticed a stark difference in the high level of rigor or demands of their own schooling in their native country in comparison to the schooling their children were



experiencing in the United States. This theme highlights immigrant parents' perspectives and understandings of the educational system of which their children were a part.

**The schooling system in the United States.** Although all participants had experienced school as parents of children currently attending school, several had also experienced it as students. Eva, Flor, Maria, and Nancy were all school-aged when their families immigrated to the United States; Gabby, Hector, Isela, and Karina spoke of attending night school as adults to learn English, and Javier was able to attend a local community college, where he earned certifications as a plumber and electrician. As immigrants to the United States, most participants stated that they found themselves relying on friends, neighbors, and family members to learn about the schools their children would attend. In thinking about their experiences, they were able to discuss aspects they liked and others they did not like about the U.S. schooling system.

As participants discussed their understandings of the education system, they spoke primarily about the vast opportunities available in the U.S. educational system. Betty and Cristian discussed the numerous opportunities they felt their children were afforded in their education. Their eldest son had attended several selective Catholic schools, which led to his eventual enrollment in medical school. Cristian shared, "Las oportunidades las hay. Para chicos, grandes, gordos, flacos, feos, para todos las hay, pero solo si las buscas" [The opportunities are there, for short students, for tall ones, for heavy ones, for thin ones, for ugly ones, there are opportunities for everyone, you just need to find them and use them]. He and his wife, Betty, cited that they encouraged their children to take advantage of available opportunities because these were not available to them in their native countries. With just a first- and third-grade

education, respectively, they relied on hard work and other noneducational opportunities to improve their lives and provide for themselves and their family.

Parent Ofelia also spoke about a life-changing opportunity her eldest daughters had to participate in a college scholarship program that led them to receiving full college scholarships. Unable to recall the name of the specific program, she indicated that this college scholarship program provided students Saturday workshops and seminars, opportunities for college visits, and other pieces which she was not entirely familiar with. If students successfully maintained their grades and participated in the program requirements, they were then given a scholarship to a college or university of their choice. As a family of five on a single income, Ofelia emotionally stated, “Ese programa nos cambio la vida a todos” [That program changed all our lives]. Her two eldest daughters who participated in the program had both completed their undergraduate studies and were now working professionals.

As participants pondered their understanding of schools, they valued and critiqued the rigid and complicated nature of the educational system in the United States. Ana spoke about the challenges she faced needing to navigate between teachers, school principals, and district staff when her son was not doing well in school. She found herself frustrated with the need to tell and retell her story and challenges to multiple staff. Eva spoke of how policies and procedures in place at her son’s traditional public school led her to leave the dual-language program that she had sought out. The school administration’s rigidity and inflexibility were frustrating and ultimately a main reason for their departure from the traditional public school. Ana exclaimed, “Es que ese sistema no sirve. Ellos creen que si está bien y que funciona, pero yo le digo que no.

Absolutamente no funciona” [The district school system does not work. They believe it does, but I will tell you it does not. It absolutely does not work].

In their respective conversations, parents Javier and Ana both detailed experiences they characterized as discriminatory. In sharing their experience with the traditional public-school system, Javier spoke about an instance involving his daughter Susana, who at the time was attending an elementary school in an affluent predominantly White suburb in Los Angeles while living with an aunt and her children who attended the same school. She was one of very few Latina students enrolled at the school, and since she was new to the school for the year, the school principal made an unannounced visit to the home with the pretense of seeing how things were in the home environment. For Javier, this would not have been an issue if the visit had not taken place at 6:00 a.m. during a school day. Although the incident made them feel uneasy, the dismissed it and did not give it further attention. But, at the end of the semester, they found themselves quite perplexed when they received Susana’s report card and its marks were not indicative of her abilities as a student. Susana and her cousin were in the same class, and spent time doing homework and other activities together, and their grades did not reflect their efforts or work. Javier recalled vividly:

Ellas son dedicadas y veía como iba en la escuela así que cuando salieron los reportes nos enojamos mucho con ella. Y nos dijeron no sabemos por qué todo hacemos en clase y entregamos tarea, hacemos lo que nos piden, y no hacemos desorden. Así que fue su tía a la escuela y se quedó a ver qué pasaba en la clase y noto que ellas eran las únicas niñas Latinas en el salón. Las únicas de piel morena y pues fue y hablo con el director y terminaron identificando a la maestra como racista y la sacaron de ahí y después todo empezó a mejorar.

They were dedicated students and I would see how she was doing in school so when report cards came home, we were very upset with her. The girls told us they too did not understand their grades as they worked hard, turned in homework, and were not disruptive in class. So, her aunt went to the school and sat in the

classroom to observe how they were doing. During her visit, she noticed the girls were the only two Latina students . . . the only ones with darker skin. She then went to the principal and raised her concerns and the teacher was investigated and deemed as racist and eventually terminated. After this, everything improved for the girls.

**School choice in the United States.** In discussing the educational system, a common finding was the recognition by participants of the newness of choice schools within the educational landscape. At just 25 years of existence, charter schools are yet another new feature of life in the United States that immigrant Latina/o parents are learning about alongside many other aspects of daily life. The dialectic nature of the portrayal of traditional public schools and charter schools, adds a layer of complex information that oftentimes includes fallacies that must be interpreted by parents during their search for schools. The insight of this process is described by the participants in this study in the following paragraphs.

As parents of older children, Javier, Gabby, and Hector spoke about how they would have liked charter schools when their older daughters were attending school. They each found the charter schools their children attended to have been a good fit for them and their children, and would have wanted the same experience their younger children enjoyed. However, they also recognized the evolutionary nature of education, and expressed satisfaction with the different educational approach the charter schools had offered their younger children.

Parents Betty and Cristian spoke about their initial interaction with school choices when they opted to enroll their eldest son, Anthony, at a Catholic school in their community. A faith-based education was important, and therefore they were willing to make the financial sacrifices necessary to have him attend. However, as their family grew to three children, they opted to have their younger children attend their neighborhood public school, and later a charter school, which

was closer to their home. Betty indicated liking choices for their children since each school was unique and offered their family different experiences. In their interview, Cristian stated, “El sistema a pesar de que no lo conozco bien veo que es mejor aquí . . . es diferente el sistema de allá al de aquí” [The school system, although I do not know it well, I see is better here in the charter than at district schools]. Hector similarly stated, “Yo no tenía mucha confianza en las chárter porque eran algo nuevo. No específicamente esta escuela sino de cualquiera” [I did not have much trust or confidence in charter schools because they are something new. The distrust was not specifically of this charter school but any charter school].

As parents of eighth-grade students, Ana, Hector, and Gabby each spoke of a strong desire for their children to enroll at a charter school for the ninth grade. Although their experiences with the traditional public schools had been in the primary grades, they found themselves beginning the process of researching and identifying charter high schools as a first step. Their respective experiences in the traditional public schools caused worry as they thought about the potential to enroll their sons at a district high school. With cracking in her voice, Ana spoke about her disappointment that the charter school they attended did not have a high school option available for her son, she stated, “Me da tristeza que mi hijo tenga que salir de aca por que lo ayudaron y eso le agradezco mucho y deben de poner un salón hasta el doce” [I am sad my son has to leave this school because he had received help and I am grateful for that. It should have up to the 12th grade so he can remain here]. Her fears for the environment he may encounter at the local high school sparked her to take action and begin exploring several charter high schools in the local area. Gabby also stated, “No se si lo apuntamos en una escuela del distrito que va a pasar. Sé que por ley le tienen que seguir ayudando, pero como que a mí eso no

me da mucha confianza, entonces mejor buscar una charter” [I do not know if we enroll him in a district high school what will happen to him. I know that by law they must continue helping him with his learning needs, but that is not very reassuring, so we are better off finding a charter school for him to enroll].

In the conversation of school choice with participants, several recounted the negative stories and rumors they had heard or been told about charter schools as an element of concern. Ana, Gabby, and Hector told of various individuals and stories they had heard from acquaintances and friends. Because Gabby and Hector’s eldest daughter, Jasmine, had only attended traditional public schools, they began to question whether the narrative of charter schools they were hearing from others was true. Overall, Jasmine’s education had been adequate, but when seeking a better school for their youngest son, Eddie, some of the messages they heard about charter schools made them worry. Gabby wondered about the validity of a charter school’s education when stating, “La validez de la escuela a la del distrito, ó sea si acabaste el quinto grado aquí y ya no quieres una chárter si te la van hacer válido allá” [The validity of the charter school in comparison with that of the district is worrisome. If my son finishes fifth grade at a charter school and you no longer want a charter school, will his prior education be seen as valid at a district school]. Since nobody else in their family had attended a charter school, questions like this worried them as they thought about their children’s education.

Participant Ana shared a similar story: “La mayor parte de mis amistades son Latinas y ellos siempre se han dirigido a escuelas del distrito y me siempre haciéndome malas referencias de una chárter cuando nadie ha tenido hijos en una chárter” [The majority of my friends are Latina/os and they have always attended district schools and always speak poorly of charter

schools although none of them has had a child attend a charter school]. This included being told that parents had to pay to attend charter schools, hearing that only students who had mental disabilities attended charter schools, and even hearing that students who attend charter schools would be ineligible to enroll in college. Ana, however, was not dissuaded by these remarks and took it upon herself to enroll in a charter school and learn whether any of these tales were true.

As an educator herself, parent Eva had the greatest insight about the school choice system. Her own education and professional experience as a high school teacher at a charter school framed her insights into the nature of charter schools in the current educational landscape. She articulated her understandings of the way charter schools have entered the educational system and disrupted the system as it has always existed. While she grappled with her decision to not participate in the traditional public-school system, ultimately her decision was grounded in her understanding that schools have not evolved and the schools in her neighborhood are not serving students and families. She went on and asserted:

Charters are a very complicated thing, right? It's stressful for me as a parent to think about this. Ideally schools serve the needs of all the kids in the community and that is a big eye-opening thing when they don't. There is wide variety within district schools and [emphasis added] within charter schools . . . I feel people want a choice for a reason.

As an alumna of public schools in Los Angeles, she had experienced the system both as a parent and student. As someone who had attended LA Unified schools in the 1980s, her experience in school was quite different, particularly because charters were not available and her family did not have the means to afford private schools. In her reflection about this, the conundrum of charters and public schools was evident in the conversation.

**Native and United States school system comparison.** Having each participant discuss his or her own educational experiences brought levity to the conversation, which usually started with a remark about how long ago that was. In each case, participants reflected upon their own educational journey and discussed it within the context of their experience with their children in U.S. schools.

As they discussed their own education, parents began by stating the furthest level they had achieved. Isela and Diana both earned degrees in business administration and were accountants in their native Mexico and Honduras, respectively. Ana's aspirations to earn a college degree and be an economist in her native Guatemala were interrupted when her father's health declined and she found herself needing to work to help support her parents and younger sister. Gabby completed the equivalent of the ninth grade and then went on to earn a certificate in computing instead of attending high school, while her husband Hector started high school in Mexico but did not complete. After immigrating to the United States, they both attended night school to develop their English language skills, and subsequently Hector went on to earn a general education diploma as well. Javier also completed the ninth grade in El Salvador, and as an adult was sent by his employer to LA Trade Tech College, where he completed courses in English language development, and earned certifications as an electrician and plumber. As he reflected on this, he felt a sense of pride and accomplishment that, despite being a father of two children, and working full time, he had been able to further his career opportunities by earning these certifications.

In pondering their experiences, the reoccurring element among participants was the difference in strictness of schools in their native countries and the United States. Isela spoke of



the fear students had for their teachers and the school principal. She recalled, “Los maestros y el director de la escuela eran personas de mano muy dura que hasta cuando uno los veía pasar, era como si eran un militar, se quedaba uno así derechito . . . y no creo que deberían dar miedo” [The teachers and the principal of the school were very tough and when we would see them walk by it was as in the military, we would stand very straight . . . and I don’t think they should make students afraid but they did]. Similarly, Javier recalled the physical nature of student discipline when he was in school in El Salvador. He shared, “Los castigos, la disciplina es ruda, te extienden tu mano y te pegan con reglas” [The punishments and the discipline is rough, it was physical, they take your hand and hit you with rulers].

In recalling their own first and third grade educations, Betty and Cristian spoke of the extensive poverty that existed in their small town in Mexico. For them, education quickly became a luxury their families could not afford. While the public school was free to attend, schools did not provide students any materials, thereby making school unaffordable. In Mexico, they shared that students were expected to buy their own supplies, books, notebooks, and writing utensils; the school only provided a classroom, desks, and a teacher. Gabby and Hector also recalled the many costs associated with attending school. As natives of Mexico, Gabby, Hector, and Isela all fondly recalled the uniform policy their schools imposed on students. As adults, they were able to laugh about the strict policies that now felt illogical.

Parent Gabby conveyed that she felt the content in Mexico was much greater than in the United States. She shared about various instances when her oldest daughter, Jasmine, was struggling with content in high school, which she had completed in elementary school. While Hector also shared this sentiment, he also challenged the utility and purpose of some of the

content they were taught in school. He vividly recalled, “Desde segundo o tercero te dejaban que te aprendieras todos los países y sus capitales y todo lo del almanaque mundial, y sino no pasaba” [In second or third grade, they would have you learn all the countries and capitals and everything else from the World Almanac, and if you didn’t, you would not pass on to the next grade level]. In contrast, they both feel their children have had a relatively easy education in terms of its expectations of content. Isela, on the other hand, found the education her daughters were experiencing in the United States to be relatively on par with her own in Mexico.

### **Chapter Summary**

The narratives, experiences, and unique situations of the participants offered this study a rich set of perspectives that furthered the understanding of the topic of selecting charter schools. The narratives and stories shared by participants contextualized their choices, and gave them an opportunity to have their story and voice heard—oftentimes for the very first time. Throughout these stories, their lives became relevant, and they grounded this study with their voices. A succinct and comprehensive summary of their vastly different experiences would further negate the uniqueness of their lived experiences. As the interviews concluded, it was striking to hear each participant share that they hoped their story was somewhat helpful, and constantly second guessed themselves and the answers they shared. Therefore, it became imperative to share their story did matter and would be tremendously helpful in this research.

From the practical nature of choosing schools in close proximity to their home to the negative and hurtful incidents that served as catalysts to change educational environments, each participant’s story highlighted the need for continuing to understand the complicated and controversial topic of charter schools in the current educational context in the United States.

Highlighting their lived experiences in U.S. schools, both traditional public schools and charter schools informed this study and offered a unique level of insight presently absent from other research surrounding the topic of school choice for Latina/o families and individuals.

This chapter aimed to highlight salient moments and stories of their lives which furthered the researchers' understanding about their selection of charter schools. The following chapter delves deeper into the findings of the study by discussing the multitude of implications emerging from this research and ways it can further policy, practice, and future lines of inquiry.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This study set out to understand the charter school selection process for immigrant Latina/o parents in the greater Los Angeles area. The data obtained from narrative interviews detailed participants' experiences with the U.S. educational system, their stories of immigrating to the United States, and their own perceptions and values of a quality education. An analysis of the data led to the emergence of the following four themes:

1. The quest for educational opportunities reflect immigrant parents' beliefs about education as a pathway for social mobility.
2. Immigrant parents know what constitutes a good education and the characteristics of a good school.
3. The power of parents' social networks and active engagement in schools.
4. Latina/o immigrant parents make meaning of the U.S. educational system.

This chapter offers a detailed discussion and analysis of these themes and details the implications of the findings of this study.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this study was to understand what factors immigrant Latina/o families considered when researching and selecting a school for their children. Additionally the study also sought to understand how immigrant Latina/o families made meaning of the U.S. educational system, and to learn what immigrant Latina/o families considered to be characteristics of good schools, teachers, and education as a whole. These interconnected

purpose statements were intentionally designed as building blocks to more deeply understand the complex topic of school choice.

The understanding of the factors considered in selecting a school required a deeper understanding of the personal beliefs and values that parents held regarding education. Thus, participants were asked to detail their experiences with the educational institutions and systems they had been a part of. Participants were then asked to discuss the characteristics and qualities of a good teacher and a good school. Finally, participants reflected on their own educational experiences and provided a comparison of their own education in their native homeland to that of their children in the United States.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study were:

Why and how do immigrant Latina/o parents in the greater Los Angeles area research and apply to charter schools?

What are the factors they consider in their decision making process?

These research questions explored the ways in which the U.S. educational system was understood, and how this understanding was used in the research and selection process of charter schools for their children. These questions generated data that detailed participants' understanding of the education system and the various factors parents considered in the school research and selection process. Examination of these factors is set within the context of school choice and the manner in which parents made sense and understood the growing prevalence of choice schools in their neighborhoods and communities.

## **Chapter Overview**

This chapter presents an analysis of the findings through the study's research questions. Responses to the research questions are situated in the extant literature that framed this study; in some instances, the literature corroborates the findings of this study, and in other areas, it added to the extant scholarship on the topic of charter school choice for Latina/o immigrant parents. The ways this study upheld the theoretical framework is presented next, followed by the contributions and implications of this study for parents, charter school administrators and teachers, school districts, the charter school movement, and social justice. Finally, the chapter concludes with several areas for future research to continue advancing the scholarship on the continuously evolving topic of school choice.

### **Answering the Research Questions**

#### **Why Do Immigrant Latina/o Parents Research and Apply to Charter Schools?**

In its broadest sense, this research question sought to learn about participants' core beliefs surrounding their children's education. As new entrants into the U.S. educational landscape, Latina/o immigrant parents make use of their social networks and capital to learn about the various educational options available to them. As a relatively newer option in the U.S. education landscape, charter schools are not well known to all parents and families; furthermore, charter schools are not found in all communities. The newness of charter schools is confounded by misconceptions and false arguments about the way charter schools function and operate.

Distilling parents' perspectives and beliefs, yielded several primary reasons why parents research and apply to charter schools: a quest for better educational opportunities, an

understanding of education as a vehicle for social mobility, a commitment to improving their children's lives, and parental involvement and connection to their children's education.

**Seeking opportunities.** As parents thought about why they researched and applied to charter schools, their responses focused significantly on the opportunities for a different educational model for their children. Various parents spoke in detail about negative interactions and experiences in traditional public schools that served as pivotal moments in their decision to find a different school environment for their children. Parents' desire to find a better educational opportunity is described by Bell (2009) as a primary reason many choose a different school. An underlying assumption of the school choice movement is that choice—in and of itself—will result in more equitable educational experiences; however this notion is debunked when the quality of the choices available to families, particularly poor families, is not all high (Bell, 2009).

The search for better educational opportunities was particularly salient for parents of students with learning challenges and disabilities who indicated their needs were not being met in the traditional public-school environment. The departure of students with learning challenges and disabilities has been documented by Winters (2014) who estimated that nearly 65% of students with disabilities opted to change schools before they reached the sixth grade. For others, the opportunity to be in a different educational environment with different programs and initiatives was an appeal of charter schools.

**Education as a vehicle for social mobility.** A driver behind parents' focus on their children's education was the outcomes and rewards their children could obtain from earning an education. Although participants of the study ranged in their own educational attainment, they all shared sentiments and thoughts about the way a quality education in the United States was a

pathway for a better life for their children. Education as a form of social and economic mobility was salient for all participants—from those with very young children to those whose adult children were now college graduates and career professionals.

Speaking about a better life for their children was a topic of salience for every participant who envisioned their children not only completing but also succeeding in their educational endeavors. Parents spoke confidently about the ways their children would complete their primary and secondary education, and go on to colleges and universities, where they would earn degrees and become professionals in their respective fields. In speaking about their children's future, they alluded to having a different and better life than their own. One participant, Patty, spoke in detail about the way in which her two high school-aged daughters would go on to college. This sentiment resonated for Patty as it appeared to have been a message she received from her own parents, as she stated, "Parents always want their kids to do better than them, my parents wanted better for me, I want better for them, and so on."

The role schooling and education play in social mobility was discussed by other parents, who indicated wanting their children's dreams and aspirations to become reality. This was specifically spoken about by parents Betty and Cristian, who shared about their own lives and sacrifices they had endured for their family and children to have a better life. They spoke about wanting their children to not have physically demanding jobs that would take a toll on their body like they have had to endure themselves. Social mobility is an expectation of education for all parents (Carnoy, 2000) and particularly for children of Latina/o immigrant parents (Perez et al., 2005).



The conversations about education and social mobility included tangible and non-tangible elements that were also described as lifestyles by participants. Parents spoke about their children's taste in clothing or electronics and their inability to always provide for them. While parents felt disappointed that they could not afford these items for their children, they used it as an opportunity illustrate the importance of an education and career that would eventually enable them to afford and maintain a certain lifestyle. In this sense, the financial rewards of education were a tangible outcome, which parents hoped would serve as a motivator for their children.

Overall quality of life was also noted as an important outcome of education. Unlike quality of lifestyle and financial attainment, quality of life was about having a balanced life that encompassed family, career, health, and well-being. This perspective emerged as important because it was attainable through the types of careers and professions children of participants would become a part of. Cristian was confident his son would not be a commercial truck driver; Gabby knew her children would not be kitchen associates at a hotel, and Isela trusted her daughters would be leaders in their careers not an assistant like herself. Their future, thus, would be greatly influenced by the education they received.

**Commitment to improving their children's lives.** Throughout their interviews, parents spoke in detail about their role in providing for their children. This went beyond providing the basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing, but also providing them with a home environment that was wholesome. For some parents, this included a faith-based upbringing or education in a Catholic school that was similar to their family's background and beliefs. To other parents, this was being able to financially support their education as much as they could.

While parents deeply valued and understood the importance of a college education, their words suggested a level of concern at the costs and hurdles of attaining a college degree in the United States. Despite these apprehensions, parents were confident and optimistic about their children's future in college. This showcased the hope and faith they placed in them and their deep-seated commitment to improving the lives of their children.

Perhaps the best illustration of parents' commitment to their children was their own immigration to the United States. As stories of hardship in their native countries were shared by participants, each of them detailed their rationale for leaving their homeland, friends, families, and everything they had ever known for a new and unfamiliar place. As participants reflected upon their sacrifices and the journey that eventually led them to their current place, none of the parents expressed any regrets in their decision. Hope for the future, along with better opportunities for themselves and their families, were most often described as the reasons they chose to leave their homelands. Collectively, their commitment to themselves and their future had shaped their lives, experiences, and the future for their children as well.

Some participants, however, had a different immigrant experience, as they were young children themselves when they were brought to the United States by their own parents. For this segment of participants, their experience of growing up in two different cultures and countries framed their own commitment to their children in a different manner. Having been students in U.S. schools in their youth, these parents had dual experience in the educational system as participants and as parents and had a different awareness and understanding of the educational landscape. Ultimately, this knowledge and experience only furthered their commitment to

ensuring they have a quality educational experience given their own school, which, as they shared, was adequate—but not as strong as the education their children were receiving.

The actions and words of participants offered a rich depiction of the commitment and sacrifices parents were willing to endure to provide for their children and families. From leaving their families and native countries to working a series of jobs to financially provide, parents spoke proudly of the hard work they had undertaken to improve their own lives and those of their families.

**Involved and connected to children’s education.** A shared value that emerged among participants was their level of involvement and connection to their children’s education. Every participant spoke this point; however, it was evidenced in their stories of the tangible ways in which they were active participants in the education trajectory of their children.

Attending school meetings, serving as PTA officer, or volunteering in classrooms were common forms of parental involvement in schools, especially for educated, middle-class parents. For many, this was their initial way of connecting to schools, teachers, and their children’s education. While this form of parent involvement was described by participants in this study, parents who actively researched and chose a school for their children to attend demonstrated the ultimate form of parental involvement. The process of researching, visiting, learning about, and applying to a school was new and quite different from the traditional schooling pathway in the United States, especially for Latina/o immigrant parents who were still developing their knowledge and understanding of the complex U.S. education system. On the other hand, the process of selecting schools has been well documented for middle-class families with knowledge of the educational system (Butler et al., 2013; Gill et al., 2001)

Participants spoke about the ways charter schools were new to them and how they learned to navigate this unfamiliar system. As a result of prior negative experiences with schools, some participants saw themselves actively seeking an alternative environment to the traditional public-school system. For myriad reasons, including mistreatment by school employees and lack of educational support for their children, parents found themselves actively pursuing other options that ultimately resulted in attending a charter school. Their active involvement and connection to their children's education resulted in selecting a different school that better met their needs.

Parents' connection to the newly found charter schools their children were attending allowed them to be proactive in their education and informed of the progress and learning in school. This connection was primarily discussed through parents' rapport with classroom teachers and the ways they participated in parent-teacher conferences, sought teacher help and expertise, and found ways of keeping abreast of student progress throughout the school year. Despite their varied educational backgrounds, all participants indicated a shared understanding that teachers were a primary connector to their children's education and were a key component of their involvement and participation in their children's school. While not all parents felt they had the language or experience to effectively do this, their desire to be connected superseded their hesitations, and they forged these key relationships anyway.

Parental engagement, participation, and involvement are commonly found in the literature and used interchangeably; they all relate to the ways parents are actively informed and connected to the happenings of their children's education (Perez Carreon et al., 2005). Although Latina/o parents encounter barriers that prevent their full participation and engagement in their

child's education—including language barriers, lower cultural fluency of the U.S. education system, generational status in the United States, childcare responsibilities, and transportation—parents persist and find ways of being present and visible in their children's education (Haynes et al., 2001; Marschall & Shah, 2016; Oakes et al., 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valdes, 1996).

**School location and upward mobility.** Several participants who attended one charter school spoke in detail about its location and its significance. This particular school was located in a foothill community in Los Angeles County that was once a working-class neighborhood but whose demographics have significantly changed due to a wave of gentrification in recent years. The campus location and student body diversity were highlighted by various parents as particularly appealing, as it was unlike any of the surrounding traditional public schools in terms of its educational offerings, programs, or campus demographics. Several parents spoke of this charter school as a destination with high appeal that rendered it desirable. One participant spoke of other parents wanting to purchase a home in the neighborhood so their children could attend the school. This level of interest by others furthered participants' curiosity and interest in the school, which resulted in their own research and eventual enrollment in the charter school. Such high interest in the charter school, however, was contrasted by other parents whose interest in enrolling in the school was due to its close proximity to their home. The location of a school as an attractor tied to school quality and exclusivity is described by Renzulli and Evans (2005), who detail White flight from traditional public schools and their attraction to schools, particularly charter schools, in suburban areas. This resonates with the ways various parents in this study found themselves attracted to the charter school their children attended while also describing the appeal of White families in a school as a signal of school quality.

The location of the charter school in a recently gentrified middle-class neighborhood, and its grounds and physical plant were also described by many parents as an indicator that it is a good school. Unlike many other charter schools in the region, this charter school did not share the campus with any other programs or schools, and thus had full access and usage of a former local district school that closed many years ago due to declining enrollment in the community where it is located. Parents, however, greatly enjoyed its location nestled among the foothills and the close access to various nature walking and hiking trails that allowed students to experience nature as part of their educational program.

A significant finding that emerged during the interviews was participants who spoke about the charter school, its students, and their parents as being “better” than those attending other schools they had encountered. Participants spoke of a difference between us, those attending the charter school, and them, those attending other public schools, with a certain air of elitism. Participants made references to other parents’ visual appearance and clothing, involvement in children’s education, and even parenting styles as indicators of difference. This difference, however, was stated in participants’ biases against parents who did not choose what they considered a better school for their children. The educational level of the participants in this study factored into these sentiments as parents with greater attainment place greater value on education overall (Haynes et al., 2010).

Additionally, several parents spoke about the diversity of the charter school and its location as elements they found appealing. In their discussion of diversity, they described the way the charter school was comprised of students of different ethnic and racial backgrounds and not solely of Latina/o students like in their prior experiences. For parents, a diverse student body

that more closely resembled the general population of the city was explicitly discussed by several participants who specifically referenced the presence of White students and families in the charter school as a sign of a good school. Participants who were educated and had earned college degrees in their native countries primarily described the sentiment that White students and families selected quality schools. As parents briefly described their previous schools, they alluded to the over-representation of Latina/o and Black students and families and the absence of White families, which they interpreted as an indicator of a lower quality school. The value of diverse learning environments particularly by college-educated parents has been noted and indicated as important by other scholars including Haynes et al. (2010) and Schneider et al. (2000).

### **How Do Immigrant Latina/o Parents Research and Apply to Charter Schools?**

In understanding the reasons why parents seek out a charter school, learning how they went about the process was equally important. As parents spoke about how they researched and applied to charter schools, they described a member of their social network as their connector to the charter school. In every instance, except one, parents had a connection to a person who served as their source of information.

**Social network and social capital.** When asked about the way they learned about charter schools, all participants except for one named a person as their source of information. This person was a former charter school parent, an acquaintance, a neighbor, a family friend, or a teacher who suggested the charter school as an option for their children.

In every instance, participants made use of their social networks, which were vast and varied and possessed knowledge and information that is not always visible or evident. The

common feature for many was the that relationship with the individual referring the charter school was new or not always well established. Newer relationships were the case for one parent who took the word of another parent she had only met in passing and also for a participant who took the word of a neighbor she had met when she moved into the neighborhood just a few weeks earlier. These new relationships, however, did not create concern to participants as they used the information given, and spent time learning about the charter school before enrolling their children.

For several others, their social network had stronger ties and relationships, which led them to have greater trust in their recommendation or referral to the charter school. One participant spoke of long-time family friends whose children attended a music-focused charter school, and several participants spoke of neighbors whose children attended a charter school as their referral. These established relationships allowed for trust to influence their ultimate decision to select a different school for their children. Parents understood relationships were important and made use of these to obtain recommendations of better schools. One participant indicated her son's classroom teacher, with whom she had a strong relationship, informed her that charter schools in her community were serving students with learning challenges better than the traditional public school he was currently attending. This institutional agent (Stanton-Salazar, 1997), while not affiliated with a charter school, served as the source of information about a better school option for this parent.

In all cases except one, participants' social networks and connections served as the link between parents and the charter school their children enrolled in. These findings are similar to Villavicencio (2013), Bell (2009), and Mavrogordato and Stein (2016), who all described the



importance of social networks and social capital as ways of assisting parents identify schools for their children.

### **What Factors Do Immigrant Latina/o Parents Consider When Selecting a Charter School?**

As parents discussed the various factors they considered when opting to enroll at a charter school, many factors were named, resulting in a varied list of parental interests, values, beliefs, and elements of importance. The following emerged as the most meaningful factors that offer the greatest insight into parents' considerations when deciding upon a charter school for their children: proximity to home, attentiveness of teachers, leadership of the school, support for students' learning challenges, positive student behavior, a welcoming community, a Spanish-friendly school, and evidence of strong parental involvement.

**Proximity to home.** While the educational programs and offerings of a school were an important factor in the selection of a school, a majority of participants spoke at length about the location and close proximity of the charter school to their home. More than any other factor, this was named and discussed as a prevalent consideration as it had very tangible and practical implications. Parents were not always able to spend time driving their children to and from school, or arranging transportation for them; therefore, they wanted a school that was relatively accessible to their home.

Of the participants in the study, about half cited the location of the charter school as a factor in choosing to enroll. In several cases, both parents worked outside the home, and therefore they wanted a convenient school their children could walk to and from home if necessary. Several others indicated that the location of the charter school was closer than their traditional public school, which only made their decision to enroll easier. One participant stated

that she had seen the charter school in the neighborhood, and without knowing much about it, wanted her children to attend the school. This stood in contrast to the typical school choice notion, where schools are intentionally selected for their distinguishing characteristics and features rather than simply by geographic location (Bell 2009; Villavicencio, 2013).

For another segment of participants, the distance and location of the charter school were seen as a minor inconvenience as they had a distinct preference for the charter school, regardless of its proximity to their home. This sentiment was echoed by other participants including two who drove over 20 minutes each way to the charter school their children attended.

**Teacher quality.** In parents' experience, the level of attentiveness of their child's teachers was a very important factor when selecting a charter school. Parents who were referred to charter schools by other parents spoke to them about the quality of teachers and the way their own children were learning and enjoying school. This piqued parents' interest in the charter school and led them to learn more about the school. For parents, the communication between parents and teachers was a key characteristic that made them feel connected to and informed of their children's education. Furthermore, attentiveness by teachers was not simply in terms of sharing concerns about their child, but also about providing positive feedback on students' behavior and learning.

**Leadership of the school.** The school's leadership and administration were also considered important factors in the selection of a charter school by the participants of this study. Parents shared that the physical presence of a school's leadership was indicative of a commitment to the school, and their interest in the well-being of the students, parents, and whole campus community. Beyond administrator presence on campus and in classrooms, the ability of

school leaders to serve as stewards of the institution to ensure continued success was also seen as very important.

**Support for students' learning challenges.** For several parents whose children had learning challenges or disabilities, a major consideration for the charter school was the availability of special education and/or academic support services. This factor was the primary reason four participants chose a charter school after they found themselves dissatisfied with the support their children were receiving in the traditional public-school setting. While special education and academic support services are available at all public and charter schools, discrepancies exist between the level and quality of service provided to students.

For several other parents, the level of academic support for their children became evident when they were informed of their children's lower than grade-level academic performance by the charter school. Since most charter schools are smaller in size than traditional public schools, teachers can better identify and address the learning challenges and needs of students. The smaller size of charter schools was explicitly described by many parents as a factor in their decision to enroll. However, this was tied in with parents' descriptions about the attention and focus their children received in the charter school; for parents, there was a correlation between individual student attention from teachers and a small school and class size.

**Positive student behavior.** During visits to charter schools, parents keenly observed and made note of the students currently attending the school and their behavior and demeanor. For several participants, what they noticed at the charter school stood in stark contrast to their prior school experiences when they saw that students were too loud, rowdy, or misbehaved. Other participants indicated enjoying seeing smiling students in classrooms, students who were

courteous, well mannered, and respectful toward each other and the adults on the campus as well. For several participants, seeing this on the campus validated their own desires and aspirations that their children's education be comprised of both academic instruction and explicitly taught social-emotional learning.

**Welcoming community.** As actively involved parents, participants spoke about the way they felt welcomed at the charter school when they were on campus. The smiling faces of students and staff made parents feel visible. Despite language barriers, participants all indicated feeling a sense of belonging and mattering through simple gestures like smiles and greetings by others on campus.

Feeling welcomed on the campus was not simply acknowledgement by other adults or staff of the school, but also by students. For many participants, this was a tangible example of the type of nonacademic education and learning that was occurring at the charter school that they also wanted for their own children.

**Spanish-friendly school.** The ability to communicate in their native Spanish with staff of the school was often mentioned as a consideration for many participants in this study. While nearly every participant had some English language skills and could communicate with others, parents cited their lack of vocabulary and confidence in the language as a barrier for them. Several parents indicated that a Spanish-speaking office employee, teacher assistant, classroom teacher, or campus administrator had provided them with a sense of reassurance and validated their decision to enroll at the charter school. The ability to communicate in Spanish with the school also allowed them to better have their needs heard and met.

**Strong parental involvement.** Actively involved parents was an important factor for parents who spoke about intentionally selecting and having their children a good school. Many participants understood parental involvement as a key factor in the success of their children's education and, as choosers of a school, they believed all parents attending the charter school were equally involved in their children's education. Parents spoke about involvement in a variety of ways that all centered on being informed about schools and education, being interested and connected to their children's education and learning, and actively participating in classroom and campus functions and activities.

### **Analysis of Findings**

This study set out to learn the factors Latina/o immigrant families considered when selecting and enrolling their children at a charter school. The narrative inquiry interviews conducted for this study yielded rich stories about the lives and histories of the participants. An inductive data analysis allowed for the emergence of four themes that encapsulated the essence of participants' experience in selecting a charter school for their children. The following section offers an analysis of the findings of this study in relation to the extant scholarship on the topic of school choice.

Most of the literature on school choice available was written about the school choice process and patterns of White, socioeconomically advantaged parents, communities, and schools. As a whole, this body of literature points to the prevalent role socioeconomics and class plays in the school choice process for families. Butler et al. (2013) indicated parental education was a factor that also influenced the school choice process, and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1992) summarized this as: "The choice process tends to work much

better for those who are most advantaged economically and educationally” (p. 14). Evidence that socioeconomic status is correlated to the quality of a neighborhood, which also influences the quality of neighborhood schools was indicated by Gill et al. (2001) and is aligned with this study and its findings. This study contributes to the understanding of school choice for a different segment of the population—immigrant Latina/o parents and families.

Bell’s (2009) longitudinal study found that “poor and working class parents did not choose from schools that varied in quality, but rather selected from school that were relative uniform—failing, nonselective, and free” (p. 206). For immigrant, working, and poor families, the options of choices may not be of similar or high quality, which results in uneven educational outcomes and attainment. Some parents, Bell asserted, created choice sets of schools from which they could select that encompassed the various ideal characteristics in an educational environment for their children. However, the parents in this study did not have choice sets and primarily relied on their social network to direct them to a particular charter school with which they were familiar.

Villavicencio (2013) examined the role of social and cultural capital in the school choice process, and found that families who attended charter schools in New York relied on their social and cultural networks rather than on school characteristics as factors when considering enrolling at a charter school. This pointed to the key role that social networks and the information exchanged within these networks played in disseminating information and influencing decisions surrounding schools. The findings of this study support those of Villavicencio (2013) and Mavrogordato and Stein (2016) who posited the key role social capital and networks play in the school choice process. Participants in this study relied nearly exclusively on the relationships

they had with individuals who spoke to them about the charter school where their children eventually enrolled. These networks included neighbors, other parents of the school they currently attended, longtime family friends, and even newly formed acquaintances. This highlights the key role networks and connections play in sharing information particularly among those without formally established networks as typically discussed in the historical contexts of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Furthermore, institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) were found to be an influence, as noted by a parent who relied on a teacher for information about a charter school.

The importance of school location and proximity to home emerged as a key factor for participants in this study. The location of a school was also discussed by Lee et al. (1996), who examined school choice with African American families in Detroit; similar findings were described for Latino families in Indianapolis by Mavrogordato and Stein (2016). The importance of school location and various other factors were also determined to be a factor for Latino families in Nashville in a study conducted by Haynes et al. (2010). As parents spoke about the location of the selected charter school and its importance, it became apparent that location was an added positive feature in their selection of the charter school. For most of the participants in this study, the charter school's close location was a strong consideration. For two parents, however, location had an opposite effect; they indicated the distance from their home was a tradeoff they would willingly endure in exchange for the education their children were receiving at the charter school.

Through the findings of this study, the researcher was able to support previous scholarship that described and detailed the school choice process and patterns for families,

specifically for Latina/o families. The specific focus on Latina/o immigrant families, however, brought forth additional factors families considered when selecting a school for their children which have not been discussed in prior scholarship. The role of teachers, administrators, and the overall school community were identified by the participants of this study as key factors that influenced their decision to enroll at the charter school. Parents indicated teacher quality was important as it provided them with a connection to their children's schooling and learning. When discussing teachers, parents used adjectives such as caring, intuitive, patient, and communicative to indicate the importance this had on their selection process.

A school's leadership and administration was also named as an important factor when parents considered charter schools in this study. Participants spoke of the manner in which they felt respected by school administrators, and the ways a strong school leadership team inspired confidence in the education their children would receive at the school. The availability and presence of school leaders was specifically named as a distinguishing characteristic that parents in this study felt strongly about as well.

As participants spoke about the charter schools their children attended, they cited the "ambiente" [atmosphere or environment] of the school as a key consideration in their decision to enroll. In this context, however, campus environment included both the physical campus and the intangible feel of the campus. The availability of green spaces and playgrounds were as important as the way the campus felt welcoming and inviting to both parents and students. This attribute can best be surmised as campus culture that contextualizes the norms, behaviors, and interactions of the members of the campus.



For the participants of this study, most of whom were native Spanish speakers, having a staff member or administrator with whom they could communicate in Spanish was an important feature of the school. Although participants had some English communication skills, their preference for communicating in Spanish with an office staff member, administrator, or classroom teacher influenced their decision to enroll at the charter school.

An equally significant element of this study was the participant narratives that contextualizes and gave life to the findings that emerged in the study. The lived histories, immigration journeys, and participant stories provided a deeper understanding to the complexity of the school choice process that is absent in other scholarship on this topic. Participant lives and histories also generated a comparison between their own education in their native countries and the education their children were receiving in the United States. This comparative element furthered the understanding of the values, beliefs, and perspectives parents held for their children's education.

### **Connection to Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study was grounded in the historical notions of social capital (Coleman, 1988), cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1976), and more contemporary versions of capital, including youth socialization and institutional agents as described by Stanton-Salazar (1997) and Yosso's (2005) cultural community wealth model. Figure 3 depicts a graphic representation of the theoretical framework used in this study and described in detail in Chapter 2 of this study.

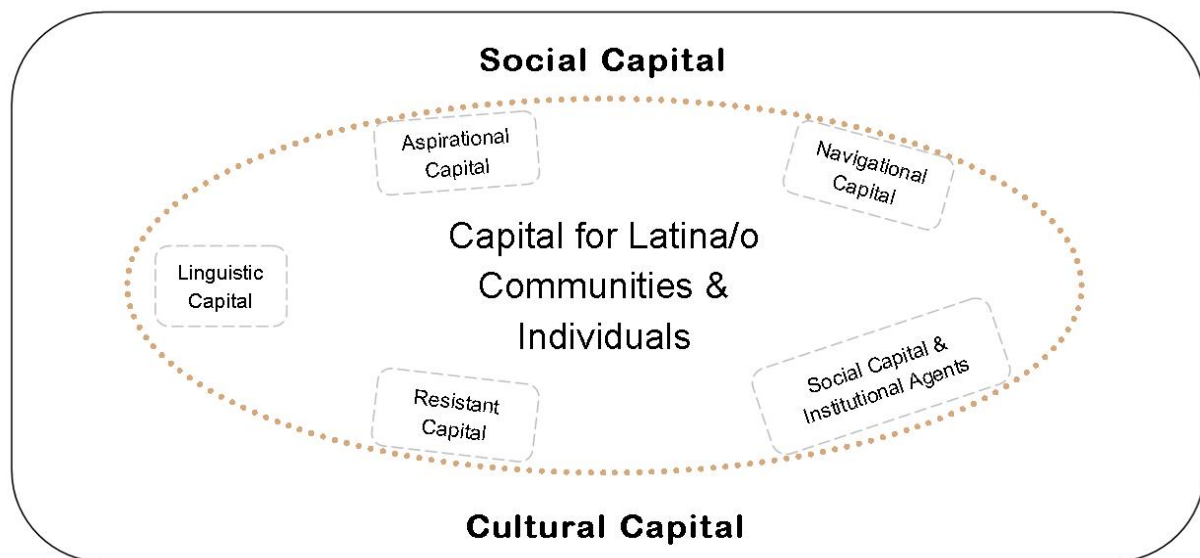


Figure 3. Theoretical framework.

This theoretical framework captures and highlights how different forms of capital could emerge in participants' experiences and stories. Aspirational capital refers to the optimistic nature of individuals and the manner in which, despite obstacles, they maintained a healthy and positive outlook for their future and that of their children. Navigational capital is the skills and knowledge developed by individuals and communities to understand and operate within systems not designed with their needs and culture in mind. This is particularly relevant in this discussion, as the educational system continues to be beset by gatekeepers, convoluted structures, and bureaucracies that overtly and covertly deny opportunities for success to students and families. Social capital and institutional agents refers to the people who are the resources and contacts that provide support and information. The social networks of Latina/o individuals can be accessed and activated for a particular purpose, or simply for camaraderie among individuals of common

cultures. Linguistic capital is the value of multilingualism and the ways Latina/o individuals make use of multiple languages and communication styles to operate in their world. Resistant capital refers to the transmission of knowledge and information about the ways of opposing structures and systems that outwardly aim to subordinate individuals and communities.

Analysis of the data found evidence to support that aspirational capital was described by participants when speaking about their hopes and dreams for the future education and success of their children. This was further evidenced in participants' own migration stories and journeys from their native homelands to the United States in search of better a future with greater opportunities and success. Navigational capital became evident when participants described their school search process and made sense of the narratives they encountered about charter schools. Participants were faced with fallacies surrounding charter schools, which they made sense of and ultimately proved to be false. Social capital and institutional agents were a pivotal element of this study, which found that nearly all participants relied on social networks as their source of information about charter schools. Institutional agents, in the conceptual sense, were not found to be nearly as prevalent as anticipated.

As parents described their dissatisfaction with schools, they were describing the resistant capital that led them to exercise their voice and take action in hopes of improving the educational experiences for their children. Attuned to injustice and discrimination, participants relied on their sense of fairness and justice and took action to ensure their children's learning needs were being addressed by the school. Parents' linguistic capital and ability to make use of their second language (English) offered evidence of their commitment to improving their lives and the lives of their families, despite any perceived barriers or challenges with language. Shared language

became an asset for many parents who found Spanish-speaking staff and teachers at the schools their children attended. Interestingly, none of the parents in this study expressed a desire for the selected charter school to have Spanish language offerings for students. This can be construed as a greater desire for students to become further integrated into mainstream U.S. society.

Overall, the theoretical framework of this study supported the assertion that social and cultural capital was unique for Latina/o individuals and communities. The departure from the White, socioeconomically privileged historical perspectives posits value in reframing the manner in which capital is referenced for the Latina/o community. It is notable, however, that nearly 60% of the parents in this study had at least some college education, which is a departure from the oversimplified generalization and categorization of the Latina/o immigrant population in the United States.

### **The Impact of Gentrification**

An overarching element of this study was the influence of gentrification on independent charter schools that operate one or two campuses in local communities. Broadly, “gentrification is about the social and economic transformation of urban neighborhoods” (Hankins, 20017 , p. 114). The ways gentrification affects neighborhoods and their schools is understood through the cyclical ways in which middle-class and affluent individuals and families use financial capital to disrupt and change the demographics of urban communities. Historically working class neighborhoods and primarily Black communities, in both urban and suburban areas, are living through these shifts. In some instances, gentrifiers are coming together with others to establish charter schools in their neighborhoods; othertimes, they are intentionally selecting to relocate into neighborhoods with an existing charter school. This complex relationship thereby disrupts

the notion of the traditional neighborhood school and redefines the concept of place and community (Hankins, 2004). As the case in this study, one charter school was grappling with the effects of a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood and feeling the effects of a socioeconomically privileged demographic impacting enrollment at the school.

The relationship between gentrification and the establishment of charter schools has been explored by Davis and Oakley (2013), who also found charter schools attracted middle and upper class families to neighborhoods. Chicago mayor Richard Daley's *Renaissance 2010* plan to revitalize schools in the city included the closure of neighborhood schools and the opening of charter schools and had major financial support from several of the city's elite real estate moguls (Davis & Oakley, 2013). In this case, the link between the ability for charter schools to help reshape neighborhoods was very explicit.

While connection between charter schools and gentrification has been documented, a causal relationship cannot be determined primarily because of the complex nature of both charter schools and gentrification. The guiding reasons for each are entirely too complex to attribute them to each other in all instances (Davis & Oakley, 2013; Hankins, 2004; Patterson & Silverman, 2013). Regardless, however, it is important that gentrification—especially under the auspices of revitalization—be critically analyzed and monitored to prevent the displacement of the communities and families who have inhabited these neighborhoods.

## **Implications**

### **Implications for Parents**

The findings of this study offer all parents insight into a series of factors that been detailed by participants as important in their school selection process. By considering these

factors, parents can gain a deeper understanding of additional considerations that may have been overlooked in their school selection process.

For parents actively engaged in the school choice process, this study offers a perspective of small independent charter schools, which are vastly different from the more commonly found charter management organization (CMO)–operated charter schools. While independent charter schools are found across the greater Los Angeles region, these are not nearly as prevalent and oftentimes are difficult to enroll in at due to the extensive demand, and small school size. In this study, all participants, except one, attended an independent charter school, not a CMO-operated school.

### **Implications for Charter School Administrators and Teachers**

At the site and campus level, the role of charter administrators and teachers is to remain committed, engaged, and joyful about the work happening every day at every school site. Parents and students were keenly aware of this and were quick to share praise or critiques to others about their experiences in schools.

This study brought forth the important role teachers play in the lives of parents and students, and the respect and regard given to them. Participants highlighted qualities, such as patience, nurturing demeanor, and professionalism, as very important to their definitions of good teachers. Additionally, charter school administrators should strive to create and maintain campus environments that offer parents an engaging campus experience where they feel welcome, important, and like members of the campus community. Being physically visible and greeting families and students were noted as small yet powerful gestures toward achieving this.

A key consideration for charter school administrators lies in the diversity and racial balance of student population. In recent years, affluent parents have coopted charter schools that were established to offer underserved students and communities a quality public education. These established, high quality charter schools are now seen as substitutes for costly private schools. This emerging phenomenon can derail an institution's efforts to serve students and families and become an enclave for families seeking a particular educational environment for their children.

### **Implications for School Districts**

In nearly every state, charter schools are educating students and offering families a school choice from the traditional public-school system. With school district boards of education serving as the authorizer of charter schools, school districts have a prime opportunity to improve the quality of education of all its students and the community. Through their varied educational programs and models, charter schools offer families opportunities not found in traditional district schools, which can be capitalized upon by school districts to serve as attractors to their district.

In many instances, unfortunately, charter schools experience a chilly reception by school districts and their staff and leadership, which sets the tone for less-than-warm relationships between charter schools and the local district. Charter schools are seldom viewed as an opportunity, but rather a threat to school districts. This perspective, therefore, prevents school districts and charter schools from partnering and learning from each other best practices in serving students and families and from becoming models in the vision of effective charter school and district relationships as envisioned by the conceptual founders of the charter movement, Al Shanker and Ray Budde. An often-missing element from many charter school's decision-making

bodies and organizations is the voice of teachers, who Shanker and Budde described as the primary shepherds of schools.

School district leaders, staff, teachers, and their respective employee unions should reconsider the prevalent notion that charter schools are decimating public education in America. For nearly two decades, this narrative has permeated every facet of the charter movement, and has become a divisive wedge that prevents collaboration, innovation and, above all, an improved educational experience to students and families. Traditional public schools were established in the Common Era as protectors of the Republic, as stewards that would impart the ideals of the democracy as it was envisioned by the nation's forefathers (Stitzlein, 2017). As charter schools continue to evolve and cement themselves into the educational landscape, traditional public school districts have a responsibility to ensure these same ideals and democratic values are part of students' education in charter schools. Through collaboration and partnership—and with the goal of serving students and families at the forefront—this, too, can be accomplished.

### **Implications for the Charter School Movement**

As the charter school movement marks its 25th anniversary, charter school organizations and institutions would be remiss not to consider their place in the educational landscape and examine their role in the improvement of the entire public education system. A reevaluation of institutional priorities, missions, and impact on communities would not only benefit the organization and its future, but have a greater influence on the students and families charter schools serve.

As charter schools consider their position and role in the public education landscape, it is imperative that their mission of serving students and families remain at the core of the institution.



Charter schools were envisioned to provide students, parents, and teachers an alternative environment that would serve as models of innovation and work toward educating a greater segment of the student body than the traditional school district (Budde, 1988). In many instances, however, this core vision of charter schools has been coopted by ambitious enrollment targets and plans that place organizational priorities above the mission of the institution. The key role of educationally interested philanthropies and donors also warrants mention, as their underlying interests in charter schools oftentimes derail and detract institutions from their missions and ideals of serving students and families. A refocus of the charter school movement onto students rather than bottom lines, outcomes, and fiscal targets is desperately needed to ensure the movement continues to hold the success and education of students and communities at its core.

### **Implications for Social Justice**

The findings of this study underscore the importance of educational choice as a social justice issue in the present-day educational discourse. As presented in this study, parents and students are not being provided quality educational experiences in the traditional public school system; and, without the financial means for private school, some parents rely on the availability of charter schools to meet the needs of their children.

While school choice has been vilified and turned into a polarizing political agenda item, the education of students in poor and immigrant communities remains at stake. The availability of charter schools in communities where traditional public schools are chronically underperforming is a social justice matter that requires educators, activists, parents, and civic leaders to rise up and demand improved quality in their schools. Often, underperforming schools are located in communities where poverty and immigration intersect, thus creating pockets of

undereducated individuals for whom upward social mobility and postsecondary educational attainment become unattainable. A deeper understanding of charter schools and their individual missions deserves consideration as an option to offering a quality educational opportunity to families and communities.

### **Implications for Authorizers and Policy Makers**

The establishment and operation of charter schools in California is governed by the California legislature through the California Code of Education. California charter law, found in Education Code Section 47605, dictates the required elements of a charter petition, which serves as the guiding document that guides the operation of a charter school. Additionally, this section of the law provides details about the function and role of charter-authorizing bodies that are responsible for ensuring that charter schools are meeting their legal obligations as detailed in a school's charter petition. Within each charter petition, a school must detail the target population the school intends to serve as well as, "the means by which the school will achieve racial and ethnic balance among its pupils, reflective of the general population residing in the district" (California Education Code § 47605(b)(5)(A-P)).

For charter school authorizers, policy makers, and legislators, the influence of neighborhood gentrification on the population enrolled at charter schools as found in this study is an area that merits consideration when charter petitions are reviewed and considered for approval. In particular, authorizers and legislators must remain vigilant of the changing demographics of a community to ensure charter schools are intentionally monitoring the demographics of students and families they enroll and maintaining access for the families who were present in their communities before the arrival of newcomers to their neighborhoods. By

effectively monitoring and overseeing the implementation of a school's charter, authorizers may accomplish this task and provide support and guidance in this emerging area.

### **Areas for Future Research and Inquiry**

The implications described in this chapter offer several potential areas for future research and inquiry that can further the topic of school choice for Latina/o individuals. While a multitude of perspectives and lines of inquiry could emerge as a result of this study, the most salient areas are presented in this section.

A primary area of research with direct implications for practice examines the intersection of gentrification, school diversity, and the coopting of charter schools by educationally advantaged and socioeconomically privileged families. The emerging trend of affluent families purposefully enrolling in charter schools found in suburban neighborhoods and communities merits a closer look to learn about the ways in which charter schools can remain true to their missions of service while balancing an influx of privileged students and families. This trend is being experienced in one of the charter schools participants of this study attended and was recently discussed among other charter school leaders from across the nation as an area of concern. An exploration of the intersection of race, class, and educational opportunities can uncover the motivations for school choice processes and patterns by a variety of families and segments of the population. In particular, this research can raise awareness of the ways educated, middle-class families are using charter schools—originally intended to serve educationally underprivileged students and families—as substitutes for private schools. This area of inquiry has potential for influencing practice and policy surrounding charter school location and

placement, admissions, and even future growth and development of charter schools in both urban and suburban communities.

Another area for future research focuses on the children of the participants in this study. A longitudinal study would follow these students as they age and move through their educational pathway to and through high school, at which point a new inquiry would investigate the factors they consider when selecting a college or university to attend. This research would examine if and how parental decisions in the school choice process influenced their own decision when researching and ultimately selecting a college or university for themselves. Through qualitative interviews with both students and their parents, a deeper understanding of how school choice at an early age influences school choice behaviors in the future can be discovered.

As charter schools and districts continue to navigate and forge relationships, a national study of best practices between charter schools and school districts can shepherd a new era of innovation and collaboration between these entities. Traditional public schools and school districts have many strengths and areas for improvement in the same manner that charter schools also have areas for growth and strengths. By examining and highlighting effective practices from across the nation, districts and charter schools can reimagine their relationships and find ways to be better stewards of their resources and maximize their influence and potential to serve students and families in their communities.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, the discussion of the findings of this study was described in detail to ascertain the significance and relevance of this topic to a variety of audiences including parents, administrators, and school district officials. The discussion and implications of this study offered

an overview of why families chose charter schools for their children, how they researched charter schools, and finally, what factors they took into consideration when selecting to attend a school.

These questions set the tone and guided the entirety of this study, and generated a diverse set of responses from parents who had intentionally sought a charter school for their children. Parents' reasons for leaving the traditional public-school environment were also varied, but were primarily centered on the lack of academic and learning support for their children. In other instances, parent experiences were rife with discrimination and unpleasant encounters with teachers and administrators, which evoked a sense of distrust for parents. For others, unwelcoming environments and rigid policies and structures alienated them from the traditional school setting and led parents to seek new schools for their children.

Participants' social network—family friends, peers, and neighbors—served as the source of information that led them to seek and learn about charter schools. For nearly every parent of this study, charter schools were an unknown choice; yet, despite this, they opted to learn more about and eventually enroll at a charter school that they felt best met the needs of their children. Parents' focus on their children's education was directly tied to the hopes, dreams, and aspirations they held for themselves and their families. As immigrants to the United States, participants left entire lives in their native homelands in exchange for the opportunity to secure a piece of the American Dream. Through hard work, commitment, and sacrifices, parents were able to forge a new life for themselves, all in hopes of providing for themselves and their families *un futuro mejor* [a better future].

**APPENDIX A**  
***Participant Informed Consent—English***

**LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY**  
Informed Consent Form

Date of Preparation: June 1, 2017

1. I hereby authorize Carlos Garcia, doctoral candidate, to include me in the following research study: *En busca de un futuro mejor* (In search of a better future): Understanding Charter School Selection by Immigrant Latina/o Families
2. I have been asked to participate on a research project which is designed to understand the factors considered when researching and selecting a school for my children and which will last for approximately four to six months.
3. It has been explained to me that the reason for my inclusion in this project is that I am a parent of a child who is attending or has attended an elementary school in the greater Los Angeles area.
4. I understand that if I am a subject, I will be asked to answer questions and share my experience as a parent through an interview

The investigator will audio-record all interviews and maintain recordings and notes in a safe and secure location on a secured computer that is password protected and accessible only by the investigator. The investigator will also maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of all research study participants.

These procedures have been explained to me by Carlos Garcia, doctoral candidate at Loyola Marymount University.

5. I understand that I will be audiotaped the process of this research procedures. It has been explained to me that these tapes will be used for this research only, and that my identity will not be disclosed. I have been assured that the tapes will be destroyed after their use in this research project is completed.
6. I understand that the study described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts: emergence of feelings, thoughts, and emotions surrounding my own educational experience, and the educational experience of my children. In the event feelings of discomfort arise and professional assistance is needed, participants may contact the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health hotline at 1-800-854-7771.
7. I also understand that the possible benefits of the study are to inform researchers, charter school leaders, and local policymakers of the reasons why choice schools and programs are

effective in meeting the needs of Latina/o families. Additionally, this research may help inform other parents about the availability of school choice options in the surrounding community.

8. I understand Carlos Garcia who can be reached at [cgarci85@lion.lmu.edu](mailto:cgarci85@lion.lmu.edu) will answer any questions I may have at any time concerning details of the procedures performed as part of this study.
9. If the study design or the use of the information is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent re-obtained.
10. I understand that I have the right to refuse to participate in, or to withdraw from this research at any time without prejudice to (e.g., my future medical care at LMU.)
11. I understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent except as specifically required by law.
12. I understand that I have the right to refuse to answer any question that I may not wish to answer.
13. I understand that if I have any further questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may contact David Moffet, Ph.D. Chair, Institutional Review Board, 1 LMU Drive, Suite 3000, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles CA 90045-2659 at [david.moffet@lmu.edu](mailto:david.moffet@lmu.edu).

In signing this consent form, I acknowledge receipt of a copy of the form, and a copy of the "Subject's Bill of Rights".

Subject's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Witness \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX B**  
*Experimental Subjects Bill of Right—English*

**LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY**

**Experimental Subjects Bill of Rights**

Pursuant to California Health and Safety Code §24172, I understand that I have the following rights as a participant in a research study:

1. I will be informed of the nature and purpose of the experiment.
2. I will be given an explanation of the procedures to be followed in the medical experiment, and any drug or device to be utilized.
3. I will be given a description of any attendant discomforts and risks to be reasonably expected from the study.
4. I will be given an explanation of any benefits to be expected from the study, if applicable.
5. I will be given a disclosure of any appropriate alternative procedures, drugs or devices that might be advantageous and their relative risks and benefits.
6. I will be informed of the avenues of medical treatment, if any, available after the study is completed if complications should arise.
7. I will be given an opportunity to ask any questions concerning the study or the procedures involved.
8. I will be instructed that consent to participate in the research study may be withdrawn at any time and that I may discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me.
9. I will be given a copy of the signed and dated written consent form.
10. I will be given the opportunity to decide to consent or not to consent to the study without the intervention of any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, coercion, or undue influence on my decision.



**APPENDIX C**  
***Participant Informed Consent—Spanish***

**LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY**  
Formulario de Consentimiento Informado

Fecha de preparación: 1 Junio 2017

1. Por la presente autorizo a Carlos García, estudiante de doctorado, de incluirme en el siguiente estudio de investigación: *En busca de un futuro mejor: Comprendiendo la selección de una escuela por familias Latinas e inmigrantes.*
2. Se me ha pedido que participe en un proyecto de investigación que está diseñado para comprender los factores que se consideran al investigar y seleccionar una escuela para sus hijos, y que tendrá una duración de aproximadamente cuatro a seis meses.
3. Se me ha explicado que la razón de mi inclusión en este proyecto es que soy madre/padre de un niño/a que asiste o ha asistido a una escuela en el área de Los Ángeles.
4. Entiendo que si soy un sujeto, se me pedirá para contestar preguntas y compartir mi experiencia como padre a través de entrevistas

El investigador grabará las entrevistas y mantendrá grabaciones y notas en una computadora segura y accesible con contraseña solo accesible por el investigador. El investigador también mantendrá la confidencialidad y el anonimato de todos los participantes del estudio de investigación.

Estos procedimientos han sido explicados por Carlos García, estudiante de doctorado de Loyola Marymount University.

5. Entiendo que voy a ser grabado en audio el proceso de estos procedimientos de investigación. Se me ha explicado que estas cintas se utilizan para fines de investigación y que no revelaran mi identidad. Me han asegurado que las cintas serán destruidos una vez completada su uso en este proyecto de investigación.
6. Tengo entendido que el estudio descrito anteriormente puede implicar riesgos y/o molestias que pueden incluir pensamientos, emociones, y sentimientos sobre mi educación, la educación de mis hijos/as, y su futuro educacional, y molestias al volver a contar y compartir sus experiencias personales con la trayectoria educativa de sus hijos. En el caso que estos sentimientos requieran asistencia profesional, puedo comunicarme con el Departamento de Salud Mental del Condado de Los Ángeles al 1-800-854-7771.

7. Entiendo que los posibles beneficios del estudio son informar a los investigadores, líderes de escuelas, y los políticos locales de las razones por las cuales escuelas chárter son eficaces para satisfacer las necesidades de estudiantes y familias Latinas.
8. Entiendo Carlos García, que puede ser alcanzado por correo electrónico en [cgarci85@lion.lmu.edu](mailto:cgarci85@lion.lmu.edu) y responderá a cualquier pregunta que pueda tener en cualquier momento en relación con los detalles de los procedimientos llevados a cabo como parte de este estudio.
9. Si el diseño del estudio o el uso de la información se va a cambiar, voy a ser informado/a y se me pedirá mi consentimiento de nuevo.
10. Entiendo que tengo el derecho de negar participar en esta investigación en cualquier momento sin perjuicio.
11. Entiendo que pueden surgir circunstancias que podrían provocar que el investigador de por terminada mi participación antes de la finalización del estudio.
12. Entiendo que ninguna información que me identifica será divulgada sin mi consentimiento por separado con excepción de lo específicamente sea requerido por ley.
13. Entiendo que tengo el derecho a negarme a responder a cualquier pregunta que no pueda o desee responder.
14. Entiendo que si tengo más preguntas, comentarios o preocupaciones sobre el estudio o el proceso de consentimiento informado, puedo contactar a David Moffet, Ph.D. Presidente de la Junta de Revisión Institucional, 1 LMU Drive, Suite 3000, la Universidad de Loyola Marymount, Los Angeles CA 90.045-2659 en [david.moffet@lmu.edu](mailto:david.moffet@lmu.edu).

Al firmar este formulario de consentimiento, Acuso recibo de una copia del formulario, y una copia de la "Declaración de los Derechos del Sujeto".

Firma del sujeto \_\_\_\_\_

Fecha \_\_\_\_\_

Testigo \_\_\_\_\_

Fecha \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX D**  
*Experimental Subjects Bill of Rights—Spanish*

**LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY**

**Declaración de Derechos de los Sujetos Experimentales**

De acuerdo con el Código de Salud y Seguridad de California §24172, entiendo que tengo los siguientes derechos como participante en un estudio de investigación:

1. Se me informará de la naturaleza y el propósito del experimento.
2. Se me dará una explicación de los procedimientos a seguir en el experimento médico, y cualquier medicamento o dispositivo que se utilizará.
3. Se me proporcionará una descripción de las molestias y riesgos que conlleva razonablemente esperar del estudio.
4. Se me dará una explicación de los beneficios que se esperan del estudio, si corresponde.
5. Se me dará una divulgación de cualquier procedimiento alternativo apropiado, medicamentos o dispositivos que podrían ser ventajosos y sus riesgos y beneficios relativos.
6. Se me informará de las vías de tratamiento médico, si las hubiere, disponibles después de completar el estudio si se presentan complicaciones.
7. Se me dará la oportunidad de hacer cualquier pregunta relacionada con el estudio o los procedimientos involucrados.
8. Se me indicará que el consentimiento para participar en el estudio de investigación puede ser retirado en cualquier momento y que puedo discontinuar la participación en el estudio sin perjuicio de mí.
9. Se me dará una copia del formulario de consentimiento por escrito firmado y fechado.
10. Se me dará la oportunidad de decidir consentir o no consentir en el estudio sin la intervención de ningún elemento de fuerza, fraude, engaño, coacción, coerción o influencia indebida en mi decisión.

**APPENDIX E**  
***English Language Interview Protocol***

The goal of this interview is to learn how and why you chose to send your child/children to the charter school they attend/attended. The following questions are designed to help guide this interview and you can add any additional details and relevant information.

1. What charter school did your child attend?
2. Why did you choose that school? What about the school was appealing or interesting for you as a parent?
3. Can you tell me about how you learned about the school?
4. Was there a person who helped share information about the school?
5. Can you tell me about some positive experiences you had with the school?
6. Can you tell me about some not so positive experiences you had with the school?
7. How has the experience of searching for a school changed your perception of the educational system overall?
8. As you think about the experience of choosing a school, what do you identify as being qualities of a good school? A good teacher? A good education?

**APPENDIX F**  
***Spanish Language Interview Protocol***

El objetivo de mi entrevista es aprender cómo y por qué eligió enviar a su (s) hijo (s) a la escuela chárter a la que asisten. Las siguientes preguntas se usaran para guiar esta entrevista, pero usted puede agregar cualquier detalle que usted crea sea importante.

1. ¿A qué escuela asiste o asistió su hijo/a?
2. ¿Por qué eligió esa escuela? ¿Qué elementos de la escuela le atrajeron a usted?
3. ¿Platíqueme un poco de cómo usted aprendió de esa escuela?
4. ¿Hubo una persona que le dio información sobre la escuela?
5. ¿Me puede decir acerca de algunas experiencias positivas con la escuela?
6. ¿Me puede decir acerca de algunas experiencias no tan positivas con la escuela?
7. ¿Teniendo en mente esta escuela chárter, ha cambiado su percepción del sistema educativo general? ¿De qué manera?
8. A través de esta experiencia de elegir una escuela, qué puede identificar como cualidades de una buena escuela? ¿De un buen maestro? ¿De una buena educación?

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