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Negotiating Choice: Latin American Immigrant Families' Experiences with High School Choice as a Lens into Educational Integration

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While education has long been understood as a powerful instrument of socialization, schools are being called on to take an increasingly important role in facilitating immigrant integration into new societies. Scholarship on immigrant integration tends to analyze this complex experience almost exclusively in terms of progress toward reaching a measurable outcome, and the emphasis on outcomes has overshadowed the processes by which immigrants realize these various dimensions of integration. Consequently, we know very little about the resources, relationships, and supports that immigrants rely on while adapting to an unfamiliar society or about the conditions under which immigrants and institutional actors effectively work together to achieve positive outcomes. This paper responds to these gaps by examining of one school district's approach to informing families about its complex high school choice policy and analyzing children of Latin American immigrants' experiences with it. The author explores how people at different levels of an education system understand their various roles and responsibilities to students and families and what this means for immigrant families' educational integration. Ultimately, the author suggests that formal recognition of the responsibilities of host society institutions and individual citizens in the process of integration—through explicit integration policies and support structures—could be an important step toward enhancing social cohesion and improving the educational outcomes of the growing immigrant-origin student population in many countries across the globe

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Introduction

In the context of unprecedented global migration, more children are attending schools outside of their parents' country of origin than at any other time in history (Eurydice 2004; U.N. Global Commission on International Migration, 2005). In the United States, for example, children in immigrant families¹ are the fastest-growing sector of the school-age population. These youth, approximately fifty-five percent of whom have geographic origins in Latin America, account for roughly twenty-five percent of all primary and secondary-school age children in the United States today (Hernandez, Denton & Macartney, 2007). In an era in which earning at least a high school diploma has never been more important for long-term personal and professional stability (Katz & Goldin, 2008; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008), ensuring that children of immigrants, like all children, obtain the academic credentials they need to succeed have become critical mandates of receiving countries and education systems across the globe. Thus, while education has long been understood as a powerful instrument of socialization, schools are being called on to take an increasingly important role in facilitating immigrant integration² into society.

¹ The phrase "children in immigrant families" refers to both first generation (immigrant) children and second generation (U.S.-born) children of at least one immigrant parent (see Hernandez, et al., 2007). It will be used interchangeably with "immigrant-origin children" throughout this paper.

² The concept of integration, which describes the process by which immigrants adapt to their adoptive countries and host societies respond to newcomers, has been widely defined and debated (Entzinger 2000; Favell 1998; Heckmann & Schnapper 2003; Penninx 2003). Interpretations of the term vary substantially across national contexts, and it has been understood alternately to connote positive (supportive) and negative (coercive) intentions on the part of receiving governments (Joppke 2007). Integration can take place across multiple spheres (e.g. social, cultural, economic, and political). In addition, scholars have identified a number of dimensions of integration of which structural (access to the labor market and core institutions), cultural (behavioral and attitudinal), social (relationships), and identificational (belonging and identity) are the most commonly referenced (Heckmann & Schnapper 2003; Spencer & Cooper 2006). In their study of the relationship between national integration policies and outcomes for second-generation children of immigrants in eight European countries Heckmann and Schnapper defined integration as "...the inclusion of new populations into existing social structures of the immigration country...It concerns primarily the immigrants and their descendants, but is an interactive, mutual process that changes the settlement society as well" (p.10). This serves as the working definition of integration for this paper.

Providing high quality educational opportunities for students from diverse racial/ethnic, cultural, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds has been an ongoing struggle in the United States and elsewhere. In the U.S., for example, significant racial/ethnic and class-based disparities in primary and secondary students' academic outcomes persist even fifty years after the end of *de jure* race-based school segregation and unequal school funding. On average, low-income Latino and African-American students demonstrate some of the most worst educational outcomes, including high dropout rates (Lutz, 2007; Orfield, 2004; Perreira, Harris & Lee, 2006), low levels of literacy (Noguera & Wing, 2006), and poor college enrollment and completion rates (Swail, Cabrera & Lee, 2006). This issue, one with potentially serious implications for social cohesion, is of prime concern to researchers and policy-makers today.

Research on Immigrant Integration

Widely accepted definitions of integration often nominally identify both immigrants and native-born citizens as actors in an ongoing, iterative process. However, despite the rhetorical recognition of the role of the “settlement society” in promoting integration, the burden of achieving integration tends to be placed almost entirely on immigrants themselves. In countries like the United States, where no formal integration policies are in place, social institutions are given limited responsibility and receive few mandates with regard to informing newcomers about their rights and obligations, explaining different aspects of social, cultural, political and economic life, and fostering their participation in society. This lack of attention to the role of autochthonous institutions and individuals on a policy level is reflected in the relative dearth of research on this topic. Instead, scholars have traditionally focused on immigrants' experiences and patterns of integration (Alba & Nee, 2003; Gans, 1992; Geddes & Favell, 1999; Glazer & Moynihan, 1963; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Vermeulen & Pennix, 2000). Even comparative

analyses of local, state, and national immigration and integration policies tend to restrict discussions to the policies themselves; as such, they often overlook the individuals who implement the policies and interface directly with immigrants (Bruebaker, 1992; Castles & Miller, 2003; Freeman, 2004; Geddes & Favell, 1999; Joppke & Morawska, 2003).

Another limitation of the scholarship on immigrant integration is its tendency to understand integration almost exclusively in terms of progress toward reaching a measurable outcome. For example, sociologists have long analyzed intermarriage rates, residential patterns, and status attainment as markers of integration (Alba, Logan & Crowder, 1997; Alba & Nee, 2003; Waldinger, 1989) while economists have debated labor market outcomes and immigrants' economic contributions over time (Borjas 1985, 1987; Chiswick, 1986). Other scholars have examined trends in immigrants' native language usage (Espenshade & Fu, 1997) or in civic and political participation (DeSipio & de la Garza, 2002). This emphasis on outcomes has overshadowed the processes by which immigrants realize these various dimensions of integration. Consequently, we know very little about the resources, relationships, and supports they rely on while adapting to an unfamiliar society.

This lacuna in the literature has left researchers and policy-makers with a limited appreciation of the conditions under which immigrants and institutional actors effectively come together to achieve positive outcomes or awareness of the structures and supports that might be necessary to facilitate successful immigrant integration. This paper responds to these gaps through an examination of one school district's approach to informing families about its complex high school choice policy. More specifically, I analyze the ways in which district officials and school-level personnel work with families to promote understanding and effective participation in high school choice. In addition, I explore how people at different levels of an education

system understand their various roles and responsibilities to students and families and what this means for immigrant families' educational integration.

The role of schools as a primary integrating institution has been widely documented (Foner, 2000; Reese, 2005). Yet, like much of the other literature in this area, studies of educational integration³ have generally concentrated on analyzing outcomes. More specifically, research in this area has historically looked at measurable outcomes of student proficiency such as language acquisition (August & Hakuta, 1997; Cummings, 1981; Espenshade & Fu, 1997), literacy and numeracy skills, or comparisons between native-born and immigrant students' performance on standardized tests (Stanat & Christensen, 2006). Other studies that have taken schools as the objects of inquiry tend to be interested in analyzing the content of curricula and pedagogical practices in terms of their multicultural sensitivity and inclusiveness (Nieto 1992, 1999). Despite the growing interest in immigrant-origin children in schools (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999), scant attention has been paid to the interactions between immigrant-origin families and school personnel and how these interactions may promote or hinder educational integration or integration more broadly.

In this paper I argue that current conceptions of the process of integration are incomplete. In particular, the role of social institutions such as schools in promoting integration has been underdeveloped. Using the mandated high school choice process in New York City as an example, I examine some of the implications of designing and implementing a policy without taking into account the challenges and needs of diverse constituents, such as immigrants, who may be unfamiliar with social norms, customs and expectations that are assumed to be universal.

³ Educational integration refers to the process by which both immigrant parents and their children learn about and participate in schooling. Educational integration may be a function of immigrant families' own efforts or those of the school/district to inform them of policies, procedures, and expectations or to provide specific language and academic supports.

Moreover, I argue that school personnel may be uniquely poised to assist immigrant families in understanding important aspects of their host society. However, without clear guidelines or requirements for schools to engage in supportive activities, opportunities for such information exchanges may be lost. Ultimately, I suggest that formal recognition of the responsibilities of host society institutions and individual citizens in the process of integration—through explicit integration policies and support structures—could be an important step toward enhancing social cohesion and improving the educational outcomes of the growing immigrant-origin student population in many countries across the globe.

In what follows, I provide a brief overview of the literature on school choice and a short discussion of the concept of cultural capital and how it relates to the process of integration. Next, I describe the study methodology. The subsequent analysis emphasizes four themes. First, I demonstrate that the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) expects a high level of parent involvement in the high school choice process but that this expectation is misaligned with some families' cultural norms and resources. Next, I explore the NYCDOE's ideas about the appropriate role of middle school guidance counselors in the process. In this section, I illuminate the gap between what the school officials believe should happen at the school-level and the policy levers they have at their disposal to enforce these ideas. I then move to school-level data and describe what five guidance counselors at one large middle school actually do to implement the high school choice policy and how this differs from the NYCDOE administrators' idealized version. These data shed light on the salience of incentives and accountability structures in quotidian school practices and priority setting. Finally, I rely on interviews with first and second generation children of Latin American immigrants about their experiences with high school choice for evidence of the NYCDOE's faulty assumptions about how families can

and do engage in school choice. I use these data to argue about the missed opportunities for schools to facilitate educational integration and highlight the links between integration and cultural capital. In the conclusion, I discuss the implications of this research for our understanding of the role of institutions in immigrant integration and review directions for future research.

School Choice

School choice is a catch-all phrase to refer to educational policies that include some mechanism of family-motivated selection. Several national and local school systems in places as diverse as Chile, China, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and England have adopted school choice programs to improve academic outcomes and to ostensibly provide families with greater discretion over their children's schooling. In the United States, early forms of school choice emerged as part of school desegregation efforts; these policies have been at the center of public, political, and academic debates since their inception. Social stratification and equity concerns have long motivated research on school choice, yet few studies disaggregate by students' immigrant background. As a result, little is known about immigrant families' participation in school choice.

Most empirical studies of school choice in the United States have focused on evaluating policy outcomes by examining three indicators: (1) the academic achievement of students in choice programs compared to those in non-choice public schools (Buckley & Schneider, 2005; Chubb & Moe, 1988; CREDO, 2009; Hoxby, Murkara & Kang, 2009; Teske, Schneider, Roch, & Marschall, 2000), (2) the impact of choice on school segregation (Frankenberg & Lee, 2003; Gill, 2005; Hill & Guin, 2002; Wells & Crain, 1997), and (3) the implications of district choice programs for existing public schools and students attending these schools (Fiske & Ladd, 2000;

Goldhaber, Guin, Henig, Hess, & Weiss, 2005; Hanushek, 2002; Hoxby, 1998, 2002; Teske et al., 2000). The role of school districts in providing information to families about school choice options is featured prominently in the scholarship as well. District-based communication efforts have achieved variable success in reaching different segments of the public (Glenn, McLaughlin, & Salganik, 1993). In fact, research has shown that most parents across racial/ethnic and income categories understand very little about school choice policies and procedures. Furthermore, parents tend to lack accurate data on the different schools in the district such as test scores, demographic makeup, and graduation rates (Henig, 1996; Schneider et al., 2000). An explicit focus on the ways in which immigrants access information about school choice, their barriers to access and their school choice preferences would extend this literature and expand current understandings of the implications of choice policies for diverse populations.

Cultural Capital and Educational Advantage

While discussions of culture, immigration, and national origin have been largely missing from school choice research, the role of culture in exacerbating or attenuating school failure has been an object of scholarly inquiry for many years. A large body of literature reveals how some students' home cultures, values, and practices conflict with education policies and expectations in ways that may hamper their emotional, psychological, and academic development. Much of this work has focused on pedagogical practices within schools that correspond to middle class forms of child-rearing and socialization (Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983; Lareau, 2003). Other studies have looked at biased assessments that disadvantage racial/ethnic and language minority students (Valenzuela, 2004). Still others have examined school personnel's normative expectations of appropriate forms of parental involvement (Lareau, 1989; Valdes, 1996).

Scholarship investigating the misalignment between immigrant and minority students' cultures and family socialization patterns and the structures and culture of schooling frequently builds on Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical work on cultural capital. Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) concept of cultural capital refers to the elite resources, knowledge, skills, and experiences that confer social and economic advantages on those who possess them. Its introduction revolutionized the field of social reproduction by identifying some of the key mechanisms through which intergenerational status transfer occurs. Bourdieu (1977) argued that school rules, norms, expectations, and even curricula were based on dominant forms of cultural capital that privileged students tend to acquire early through family socialization but that most other students lack.

Researchers in education have relied extensively on Bourdieu and Passeron's theoretical work to understand social reproduction and intergenerational status transfer (Heath, 1983; Lareau 1989, 2003; MacLeod 1995; Wells & Crain, 1997). Lareau (2003) and others (Stanton-Salazar 2001; Wells, 1996) for example, have invoked cultural capital to explain the alignment of school routines to the child-rearing practices of the dominant class. What has largely been overlooked in this literature, however, is the possible role of schools in helping students and families to generate cultural capital. Thus, as with the integration scholarship, the field is ripe for studies to examine the place of institutional actors in the picture. In fact, there is considerable overlap between the type of knowledge and information that would help immigrants successfully integrate into society and the cultural capital that people active to advance educationally and professionally. This study therefore engages with both theoretical traditions in an attempt to demonstrate how cultural capital generation can also promote integration. It also aims to identify a concrete role for schools and other social institutions in these parallel processes.

Research Methodology

The transition to high school is often considered one of the most difficult and challenging stages of adolescence (Blos, 1979; Erikson, 1953, 1968; French, et al., 2000; Neild, Stoner-Eby & Furstenberg, 2008; Seidman, et al., 1996; Way, 1998). In New York City, this transition is accompanied by a set of additional responsibilities for students and parents through the existence of a district-wide high school choice policy. This longstanding policy requires all eighth grade students who plan to attend a public (non-charter) high school in New York City to submit an application in which he/she ranks up to twelve high school programs. Each year, the estimated 85,000 eighth grade students who participate must choose from among 600 programs in approximately 400 public high schools across the city's five boroughs. These students and their families are tasked with navigating a sea of educational options; their ultimate school selections can have serious implications for their future given the dramatic variability in school quality across the district.

New York City has played an historic and enduring role in the United States' immigration narrative. Its tradition of receiving immigrants coupled with the size and heterogeneity of its current immigrant population make it a fitting place in which to explore questions related to immigrant integration. Moreover, given that New York City is one of the few districts that require all students to participate in a form of school choice, it also presents researchers with the rare opportunity to study the choice behaviors of low-income immigrant students and families who have not traditionally been captured in the scholarly literature on this subject.

Design and Case Selection

Qualitative research methods are best employed to develop detailed and nuanced understandings of people's experiences of the world. Furthermore, focused observations allow researchers to identify patterns of behavior and relate micro-level processes to larger structural and political events and cultural practices. Because of the dearth of ethnographic work describing the relationships among school personnel and immigrant families vis a vis school choice, ethnographic observations were combined with semi-structured interviews and document analysis to answer the key questions motivating this project: how does a large, urban school district understand its role, the role of middle school personnel, and those of eighth students and their families in the process of choosing high schools? What expectations do district administrators have of school choice participants and how do these expectations compare to the reality of poor, immigrant-origin students' and families' choice behaviors? What are the implications of the way in which the school district implements a high school choice policy for low-income children of Latin American immigrants' experiences with the process? And finally, what does this research say about the relationship between social institutions and immigrant integration more broadly?

The findings presented here involved ethnographic observations of informational events related to the high school choice policy including workshops about how to fill out the high school application and high school fairs hosted by district and borough representatives of the Office of Student Enrollment Planning Operations (OSEPO) at the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE). I attended six such events, each lasting between two and four hours at school sites in the Bronx, Queens, Manhattan and Brooklyn between June 2008 and December 2009. I also attended workshops for students and parents organized by three large, high poverty

middle schools with predominantly immigrant or immigrant-origin student populations during this same period. During these observations, participants went about their regular activities without interference, and I took notes on who attended the events; the format and content of the information provided by district and school personnel; whether translation and interpretation services were available; the questions that parents asked; and the interactions between parents and school personnel. These observations enabled me to learn in detail about the various district wide communication efforts, hear NYCDOE officials articulate their expectations of participants and recommend strategies for making effective school selections, compare different middle schools' approaches to explaining the process, and monitor interactions among students, parents, and school personnel at events specifically designed around school choice.

The ethnographic observations of city-wide events were supplemented by analysis of school choice materials developed by the New York City Department of Education. OSEPO produces a host of publications about high school choice in New York City including a 600-page *Directory of New York City Public High Schools* that is distributed to each rising eighth grade student. This office also publishes shorter brochures and pamphlets that offer tips to parents about how to work with their children to select high schools. Consideration of the type of media used (e.g. electronic, print), its accessibility (language, technological requirements), the content of the information provided, and the criteria emphasized in how to determine appropriate school selections factored into my analysis of these materials. I paid particular attention to the list of suggested activities for parents and students and the expectations, both articulated and implied, of parents' roles in the choice process.

To complement the city-wide view of high school choice, I conducted over 250 hours of fieldwork at one middle school with a predominantly poor, immigrant-origin student population

where I observed in detail how school personnel implemented the high school choice policy. Specifically, I was interested in understanding who was responsible for overseeing high school choice at the school-level, what resources were allocated to informing students and parents about how the process worked, where it fell on the school administration's priorities, and how the school personnel felt about the high school choice process and their roles in it. I spent much of my time shadowing the five guidance counselors while they engaged in choice-related activities such as distributing applications or conducting presentations for small or large groups of students. I also conducted informal interviews with each guidance counselor about his/her experiences and observed their interactions with students who sought their advice or assistance with the application. Finally, I met with the principal on at least five occasions to learn more about his goals for the school, and I interacted with other school support staff and eighth grade teachers on a regular basis. In addition, I used the school as a site to recruit student and parent interview respondents.

To ensure the greatest potential for generalizability of findings, I selected a focal middle school that was theoretically representative of the types of schools that low-income children of Latin American immigrant parents generally attend. Orfield & Lee (2005) report that Black and Latino students are three times as likely as Whites to be in high poverty schools. Furthermore, nation-wide almost fifty percent of limited English proficient (LEP) students attend schools in which thirty percent or more of the student population is classified as LEP (Fix & Ruiz de Velasco, 2001). The focal middle school reflects these national trends in terms of high poverty

(81 % free lunch⁴), high racial segregation (98.2 % non-White), and intense linguistic isolation (37.9% English language learners.)

“IS725” (pseudonym) serves approximately 2100 students in grades six through eight. Upon enrollment in sixth grade, every student is assigned to one of five “academies,” each with its own assistant principal, guidance counselor and dean, and the student remains in this academy all three years of middle school. The student body is comprised primarily of first and second generation children of Latin American immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Ecuador, and Colombia. There is also a small, but growing number of students from Central America, China, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Eighty percent of students are Hispanic followed by twelve percent Asian, roughly six percent Black and two percent White. The school’s high proportion of English language learners (ELL) far outpaces the city-wide average of 13.8 percent. Furthermore, in the 2008-2009 school year, 9.7 percent of students were classified as “recent immigrants,” a designation given to students who had enrolled in school in the United States for the first time in the past three years.

Semi-structured interviews with eighth grade students and school personnel IS 725 and an interview with two OSEPO administrators constitute the last form of data collected for this part of the project. I interviewed sixteen students who demonstrated variation in terms of academic achievement; peer group ; birth order; generation status (first or generation); English proficiency; and country of origin/parents’ country of origin. These characteristics were hypothesized to be salient in predicting differences in students’ experiences with high school choice. During the interviews I asked students a series of questions about their participation in the high school choice process including their sources of information, the names of the high schools

⁴ Students eligible for free lunch are from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the Federal poverty guidelines (U.S Department of Agriculture, 2009). Researchers often use the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch as a proxy for school poverty.

they listed on their application, their rationale for school selections, their parents' involvement in the process, their role relative to their parents' in decision-making, and the people who most strongly influenced them in making school selections. Four eighth grade teachers at IS 725 whom students identified as influential in their school selections were interviewed as well. I asked the teachers about their formal responsibilities with the choice process and their informal involvement. Finally, I conducted a joint interview with two senior administrators in the Office of Student Enrollment and Planning. This interview focused on the participants' contact with middle and high schools throughout the process, their expectation of guidance counselors' roles, and their opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of the current iteration of the high school choice policy.

Results

Expectations of Parental Roles in High School Choice

The New York City Department of Education presents high school choice as a family endeavor in which students and parents, equipped with information provided by high schools, middle school guidance counselors, and the Office of Student Enrollment and Planning Operations, are empowered to identify and apply to schools that most closely match students' interests and needs. Its conception of high school choice and delineation of roles can be seen on the NYCDOE website, where it describes the process in the following way: "The high school admissions process is centered on two principles: equity and choice. The student-driven process enables students to rank schools and programs in an order that accurately reflects their preferences...The Department of Education conducts workshops and fairs to help parents and students learn about the high school admissions process and make informed choices" (NYCDOE, 2010). The NYCDOE has built a set of practices and procedures around these core

tenets. Yet, as the results of this study show, not all families participate in the process according to the NYCDOE's guidelines or in line with its expectations.

In virtually all of its published materials and at each of the borough-based and city-wide school choice events I attended, the New York City Department of Education clearly communicated its idea of parents as the major force behind students' high school choices. Parents' presumed familiarity with their child in academic terms formed the foundation of this expectation. District and borough-based staff referenced this idea on multiple occasions. At one high school choice event held for sixth and seventh grade parents, a representative from the borough enrollment office told the small audience of approximately twenty children and adults, "Parents, you know better than anybody what your child is capable of and what his strengths are." At the city-wide high school fair, held annually during one weekend in the fall, an OSEPO administrator echoed this thought: "Nobody knows your child better than you—their strengths, academic weaknesses, interests." Time and time again, NYCDOE employees revealed their assumption that parents would know their child's academic skills and capacity intimately. However, the normative idea of parents as the authority on their child's education does not hold in many cultures and education systems outside of the United States, particularly in Latin America (Reese, Balzano, Gallimore & Goldenberg, 1995; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). As a result, students whose parents do not take the reins in identifying appropriate schools stand to be at a disadvantage; the NYCDOE narrowly defines its role as information provider and does not fill this gap with additional guidance supports.

The NYCDOE has developed an exhaustive list of recommended activities for parents and students to engage in before completing the high school application. These activities, which are cited repeatedly at workshops and in publications, reflect the NYCDOE's expectation of

parents in the choice process and its understanding of the appropriate division of labor between the district and families. Moreover, this list of steps brings to light the complexity of the process that students and parents must negotiate.

OSEPO's recommendations to families focus primarily on how to "clarify what's important to you [and] find the programs that best meet your needs," is on those activities associated with winnowing the 600 possibilities to no more than twelve high school programs. One document, *How to Navigate the Citywide High School Fair*, which was distributed during the "Summer Workshop Series" held in July, provides a window into OSEPO's perspective on what families should be doing in order to successfully participate in the high school application process. Furthermore, it gives a concrete example of the volume of tasks recommended to students and parents.

The two-and-a half page document begins with a series of activities to complete in advance of the high school fair. Under the heading "come prepared," bulleted suggestions include "have several conversations with your child about his/her interests, transportation considerations, etc..." "Use small Post-it notes to mark those pages [of the *High School Directory*] of the schools you want to visit at the fair," "Write down questions that you might have on the school's page or the Post-it note," and "Once you have identified the schools in which you and your child are interested, conduct additional research" by going to the school's website and looking at the Learning Environment Survey Report, Quality Review Report, Progress Report, and Report Card. Notably, beyond listing these reports as one way to learn more about a school, the document does not provide any explanation about the reports or how they might be useful. In addition, no reference is made to alternative ways of obtaining this information if people do not have Internet access.

Recommendations for what to do while at the fair follow the list of advance tasks. OSEPO has generated twenty questions that students and parents should ask school representatives as they proceed through the fair. The proposed questions relate to school culture, the freshman program, acceleration and remediation, intervention services, average class size, uniforms, and dates of open houses and tours. Given that approximately 40,000 people attend the city-wide fair over the course of the weekend, it would be quite difficult to cover all of these questions with even one school. After the fair, students and parents are instructed to “Fold the corner of the pages of the schools you visited,” “Review the schools with your child” by discussing what you found out about the schools, what concerns were raised, and what additional questions you have, “Decide if you would like to go to the open house to learn more about a particular school,” and, “If you visited the exhibit of any schools that you did not research previously, take time to research them...in preparation for the Borough Fairs. This final set of tasks is to be completed within forty-eight hours of their attendance at the city-wide fair. Taken together, these suggestions portray the NYCDOE’s lofty expectations of what families should do to “make the right choice.” However, these expectations are far removed from what some students actually can and do accomplish.

In sum, the students and families in New York City charged with choosing high schools face a highly involved process that, when described by the Office of Student Enrollment and Planning Operations, entails myriad steps, anticipates significant monitoring and parental involvement, and requires in-depth knowledge of the range of educational options from which they must ultimately select. While it appears (based on the number of publications it produces and city-wide events it organizes) that OSEPO has invested substantial resources in disseminating information to participants, data from this study show that some of the most

disadvantaged students and families never accessed any of this information. Instead, they operated within an entirely different context and under a set of constraints that OSEPO failed to take into account in its implementation of the policy.

Information Asymmetry: Reliance on Electronic Media and Lack of Translated Materials

The design of the city-wide high school choice policy and the communications strategy that the NYCDOE employs to inform people about it are misaligned with the needs, resources, and realities of the students and families it serves. First, the idea that all parents will assume a leadership role in making high school selections for their children does not correspond with many families' traditions and cultural understandings of the proper role of parents in academic matters (Reese, et al., 1995; Stanton-Salazar 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Valdes 1996; Valencia & Black 2002). Next, OSEPO's instructions for successful participation in the process imply a nearly impossible time commitment for families who face work, parenting, and other demands. Finally, the modes of information transmission, reliance on electronic sources, and the lack of printed, translated information leave people without Internet access and those who require materials in languages other than English with fewer outlets.

To start, during the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years, the *High School Directory* was only available in printed format in English. While the *Directory* has been translated into the eight most commonly spoken languages (Spanish, Haitian-Creole, Russian, Chinese, Korean, Urdu, Bengali, and Arabic), the translated version was only available electronically on the NYCDOE website. Despite the fact that Internet usage has grown exponentially in the twenty-first century, low-income people with less education tend to have lower levels of computer literacy and less frequent internet access (Dimaggio & Hargittai, 2001; Hoffman & Novak,

1998). As a result, getting even basic information about schools may be more difficult for people on the disadvantaged side of the “digital divide.”

Beyond the question of families’ Internet access, there are serious costs associated with downloading and printing a 600-page document. Yet, other than the single-page description of each high school in the *Directory*, virtually no information about individual schools was readily accessible in printed format. The same was true of school-level performance reports mentioned previously (the Learning Environment Survey Report, Quality Review Report, Progress Report, and Report Card.) Thus, the NYCDOE’s repeated instructions to use the *Directory* to identify schools and to conduct additional research on the Internet ignored the fact that some families did not have printed versions of the *Directory* in their home language or the means to use the Internet as a research tool.

Guidance Counselors in the High School Choice Process

Idealized Role

The city-wide communications strategy occurs in the absence of specific requirements or oversight of what happens at the individual school level regarding high school choice. In other words, OSEPO does not set forth minimum standards for what each middle school must do to prepare its students and parents to choose high schools. Instead, schools are left on their own to determine what resources and personnel, if any, will be allocated to working with families on high school choice. Although OSEPO representatives describe in detail how they would like middle school guidance counselors to participate in this process, without proper guidelines, incentives or supervision, this research shows that school-level approaches depart radically from this ideal.

In its various school choice materials, OSEPO identifies the middle school guidance counselor as the primary point person at the school-level to whom questions about the process should be directed. The document *Making Choice* begins by explaining, “Your school’s guidance counselor will be best able to answer your questions and help you complete this process.” In *Choosing a High School*, the list of “Special Strategies” for parents includes a recommendation to “Get to know your child’s guidance counselor—make an appointment to visit your child’s guidance counselor in the fall term to discuss your child’s high school plans.”

OSEPO administrators made similar comments to this effect at the different workshops held across the city. For instance, a central office staff person urged the audience of over 200 adults and children:

Please, please you can never underestimate the guidance counselor in your school. They are really an extension of us. There is no way we can meet you guidance needs at the central office... Work in tandem with the counselors as much as you can. You can get their buy-in as to which programs make the most sense to put on the application.

At the city-wide fair, the importance of guidance counselors was mentioned at least four times over the course of an hour-long presentation. At one point, an OSEPO administrator said:

...The guidance counselor is the key person for everything. It is very, very important that you work closely with your child’s guidance counselor... That’s their job—not just for the specialized high schools. You should have an open line of communication with your child’s guidance counselor—not only phone calls and visiting but also email. So you should get the guidance counselor’s email and communicate with he or she [sic] that way.

Parents were also advised to meet with their child’s guidance counselor before handing in the application to “Make sure they know about your choices, whether or not they make the most sense and you are making the most use of your twelve choices.” Finally, while one Borough Enrollment Director told the audience at a workshop that “The guidance counselors aren’t always as informed about the schools. It is really up to parents...” she also suggested that parents consult with the guidance counselor by “ask[ing] what they know about your child that you

might not know. This might help you understand your child better and choose appropriate schools.”

Despite frequent references to the ways in which guidance counselors could assist families with the high school application, OSEPO has neither developed formal requirements nor established a baseline number of activities that schools or guidance counselors must complete in preparation for their students’ submission of the high school application. What is more, every time guidance counselors were mentioned, either in publications or at workshops, it was ultimately left to parents to initiate contact, make requests and ask questions. In this way, parents were basically assigned yet another task in the choice process.

The assumption that all parents will feel equally at ease contacting their child’s guidance counselor or that guidance counselors will be able to communicate with parents in a language that they understand is again belied by research to the contrary. A vast literature on home-school relationships has demonstrated substantial variation in parents’ likelihood, level of comfort and feeling of propriety about contacting school and making requests, inquiries or demands. It has been shown that on average, poor immigrants with low levels of education, limited English proficiency and undocumented status (Delgado-Gaitan 1992; Guendelman, Angulo, Wier, & Oman, 1995; Reese et al., 1995; Valdes, 1996) have less contact with schools than higher educated and middle class parents. The same is true of African-Americans, who have historically demonstrated greater levels of institutions distrust (Corbie-Smith et al., 2001; Gamble 1997; Noguera 2003; Stulberg 2008) and working class parents of various racial/ethnic backgrounds (Lareau 1989, 2003).

An interview with two representatives from the central district office provided additional details about the nature of the relationship between OSEPO and school-level guidance

counselors. It also painted a more nuanced picture of the divide between their ideas about what guidance counselors should be doing to help families with the application and their ability to implement or enforce this in any systematic manner. In the interview, the OSEPO administrators identified aspects of the choice process in needs of improvement—specifically with regard to the provision of information to families. Their diagnosis of the problems reflects a narrow appreciation of its shortcomings. Moreover, their proposed solutions demonstrate a limited view of the possible avenues for responding to gaps in students’ and parents’ knowledge about how to successfully participate in the choice process. Consequently, the interview provides evidence of the district representatives’ failure to recognize the potentially powerful role of institutions in generating cultural capital and, in some case, facilitating educational integration.

Limited Oversight

Staff members in the central Office of Student Enrollment and Planning Operations have limited contact with school-level personnel in matters related to the high school choice process. While OSEPO offers optional trainings for guidance counselors about how the process works and how to use the online system to enter students’ applications, there is no required professional development. As a result, OSEPO only interacts with people who seek them out. They admittedly know very little about what happens on the ground.

I: Do you work directly with schools on the choice process at all?

R1: Yeah, we do trainings for the counselors...The principal has usually assigned someone at the school, usually a counselor, to deal with the 8th graders...But, unless we interact directly with people from the school level, we don’t really know how they do things...We put out so much information. Some of them send us emails...Whether we actually reach all guidance counselors, we can never really know. There are so many out there.

When OSEPO employees do have an opportunity to engage with middle school guidance counselors, the discussions usually center on administrative tasks related to the application.

When asked about the content of the trainings, the OSEPO respondents referred only to the technical aspects of the application process; conversely, topics such as the appropriate role for guidance counselors and expectations of the type of assistance they will provide to students and families were never mentioned.

I: Can you tell me what specifically you do in your trainings?

R1: Well, mostly we talk about the system itself, the mechanics of navigating the system. How they have to enter things into the computer... We have a powerpoint presentation, kind of like the one we use at the fairs. We go through the different screens, and I tell them things that aren't on the screen. Based on the type of program—screened, unscreened, Ed-opt...we explain what they have to do.

OSEPO also uses the trainings to remind guidance counselors of the deadline for entering all of the 8th grade students' applications in the online system. Respondents emphasized the importance of meeting this deadline more than once over the course of the hour-long interview.

In doing so, they revealed it to be one of their key priorities:

I: Can you tell me what specifically you do in your trainings?

R1: ...We make sure that the counselors know the deadlines, that they are able to do this in a timely fashion. We want them to get all of the applications on time so we don't have to keep asking. It's a tough part of the process.

In fact, one of the few ways in which OSEPO can actually monitor middle school guidance counselors is by tracking when they enter student applications. Another way is by counting the number of appeals their students make after they receive their high school assignments in April.

I: Is there any way you can monitor the guidance counselor's success at informing families?

R1: We can look at the data, monitor when the applications are being entered. We can see if this work is getting done. And we want it on time. For us, it is really important that the work gets done and done on time. A lot of time, it's kind of hard because we do have to follow up with individual guidance counselors or schools. The 8th grade counselor procrastinates and waits until right before the deadline. The system can't handle the volume...If we don't see activity we contact them—sometimes the guidance counselor directly or, if we need to bump it up,

sometimes we contact the principal. And the principal might not have any idea about the deadline or when it gets done. They have so much going on...

In contrast to their access to school-level data on when guidance counselors are entering applications, OSEPO administrators have no way of knowing what guidance counselors and schools do to explain the process to students and families. This lack of oversight exists despite the fact the OSEPO representative clearly articulated what they think guidance counselors should be doing. When asked to describe guidance counselors' responsibilities in the application process the interview respondents first named a series of administrative duties (distributing directories and applications, collecting and entering applications before the deadline). They also cited a range of additional activities in which they expected guidance counselors to engage to support families during the application process.

I: What are your expectations for what guidance counselors will do in terms of outreach?

R1: Explain the mechanics of the process. Follow up with families. Do guidance presentations to the classes, to the 8th grade classes for example. Work closely with the families. Be proactive in monitoring the applications; look at distance from home—making sure it isn't too far. Making sure the student is eligible for the program or that it is a good fit based on what the guidance counselor knows about the student.

This description of the guidance counselor's role places substantially more onus on school personnel for inserting themselves as advisors into the process than what was found in publications and in the commentary during public events. Yet, despite a clear vision for what effective school-based support for eighth grade families looks like, OSEPO has neither leverage nor tools at its disposal to mandate such outreach:

I: Is there any way you can monitor the guidance counselors' success at informing families?

R1: Well, we can't really see what each guidance counselor is doing. It has to happen at the school level. The AP or principal, if that's part of the rubric that they use to evaluate the guidance counselor then maybe it can show up there.

The interview respondents were also well aware of the extreme variability in the quality of guidance counselors and the extent of the support provided to families:

I: What is the distance cutoff that triggers an alert about distance [of a school listed on a student's application from his/her home address]?

R1: ...Guidance counselors, when they enter the choices into the system, are not really paying attention to them. So, this tells them. Of course, there are always some counselors who feel like, 'I don't care as long as they get it [the application] in. You have a Bell Curve: there are always some good ones and some not so good.

Furthermore, they noted the fact that the high school choice process may be of little import to middle school principals who have no reason other than altruistic ones for dedicating school resources to help students get into top schools.

I: Earlier you mentioned that sometimes a middle school principal might not know what is going on with the high school process. Where do you think it fits into a middle school's priorities?

R1: I think that as a principal, you would like to see your middle school students getting into the specialized schools, the ritzy programs. If you get a lot of kids into those kinds of schools, it is kind of like a feather in your cap. It might help you recruit elementary school kids to your school also. Not everyone thinks along those lines though or even thinks it is relevant at all. It's really up to the principal. They all want their kids to do well, to graduate.

R2: I've not convinced that they are incentivized at all. They are not given any incentives to be more engaged in the process. Of course, they care about their students—they want them to be promoted, to graduate. But beyond that I don't think there is necessarily a focus on getting kids into their top choices or into the screened programs. They look at a set of kids and they want them to do well.

Thus, OSEPO respondents understood that middle school principals and guidance counselors lacked sufficient external motivation to provide the extensive support and guidance that they had described. When prompted, they also named possible remedies to the current lack of incentives and discussed the potential benefits of such changes:

I: Do you think there are any ways that there could be incentives?

R2: It would help our job a lot for guidance counselors to be incentivized to be more engaged and provide more information to the parents. Maybe mandating PD [professional development] in this area or having counselors and parents do this together. As we are relying on families to

be more engaged with this, we are also relying more on guidance counselors. So the guidance counselor's engagement will affect how much information parents have.

Despite their consciousness of the lack of incentives for middle schools vis a vis high school choice, it is important to note that the OSEPO respondents only discussed this as a problem and identified possible solutions after explicitly being asked about it. Moreover, the OSEPO administrators never suggested concrete ways for the central office to be involved in improving school-level assistance to families, either through increased oversight or top-down initiatives. Instead, the respondents singularly described the role of the central office in terms of leading a city-wide effort to disseminate information and providing on-demand support to borough and school-based staff when necessary. Tellingly, the respondents referred to the problem of information asymmetry among eighth grade students and families on a number of occasions without prompting; however, they did not point to differences in middle schools' engagement with families as the root of the issue. Instead, they articulated a need to diversify city-wide outreach strategies and simplify information:

I: Can you tell me what specifically you do in trainings?

R2:... As much as we trumpet this as a choice process, not everyone has equal information... This is the danger—an unlevel playing field. Some families are more equipped to navigate it. We try to conduct outreach to every part of the city. We do workshops, fairs... We try to reach out as broadly as possible. We try to find as many different ways to hit as many of the families we can. There is an opportunity to improve—we still have a long way to go. I don't think we're there. We tend to rely a lot on the same ways of doing things... We need to do different things to reach people we aren't getting to... Because we are really just reaching the same people.

Thus, while the OSEPO respondents recognized the ongoing inadequacies of its current outreach and communication practices, they restricted their analysis of the problem to a city-wide perspective. Consequently, they only suggested making changes to those parts of the process for which they were directly responsible, that is, providing information to families at a

city-wide level through publications, workshops and fairs. Conversely, they virtually ignored the possibility of OSEPO playing a role in improving school-level approaches to working with families—for example by developing enforceable guidelines and requirements for what schools must do to prepare students and parents for participating in the high school choice process.

Guidance Counselors' Actual Role in the High School Choice Process

The Office of Student Enrollment and Planning Operations (OSEPO) acknowledges the need to level the presently unbalanced playing field of choice. Moreover, it recognizes the potential benefits—to students and to its own operations—of increased guidance counselor involvement in individual families' school choice decisions. However, there are currently no structures or mechanisms in place by which it can monitor school-level activities and ensure that school personnel provide this type of support, particularly to the neediest students. Evidence from one theoretically representative middle school in New York City shows the chasm between ideal described by OSEPO administrators above and the reality of what guidance counselors do and what students and parents experience on the ground.

Focus on Completing Administrative Tasks

The five guidance counselors at IS 725 were left solely in charge of the high school choice process for eighth grade students. While the principal and five assistant principals under whom they worked were familiar with the application in name, they claimed no direct involvement in shepherding eighth grade students through the process. Instead, high school choice, which was viewed as a largely administrative task, was understood to be part of the guidance counselors' diverse professional responsibilities. In response to this substantial burden, guidance counselors sought to minimize the amount of time and attention the high school application demanded of them.

With caseloads of approximately 400 students each, on any given day a guidance counselor at IS 725 might be leading mandated counseling sessions with an individual or small group of students, mediating a student conflict, participating in a disciplinary action meeting or meeting with parents. Left alone to manage the application process from start to finish, the guidance counselors face a series of time-intensive bureaucratic procedures that included distributing individualized applications⁵ to each student, visiting classrooms to announce registration for the Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT) and auditions, faxing copies of each applicant's final seventh grade report card to schools requiring auditions, entering every student application manually into the online computer system, and following up with individual students who had not turned in their applications by the deadline. In addition to these basic administrative duties, guidance counselors were responsible for explaining to students (and sometimes parents) how the process works.

Given time constraints and their considerable workloads, reviewing the mechanics of the choice process was not a high priority for the guidance counselors at IS 725. On occasions when they did inform eighth graders about the application, the guidance counselors employed distinct approaches and suggested a variety of different and sometimes competing strategies for deciding which schools to choose. For example, when Mr. Sanchez, the guidance counselor for Academy "A" distributed the high school applications to each of his six eighth grade classes in mid-October, he spent nearly an entire class period providing step-by-step instructions about how to use the *High School Directory* and how to correctly fill out the application. He stressed the importance at looking at a program's eligibility criteria and recommended that students list every program in a particular school if they wanted to improve their chances of being accepted there.

⁵ Each eighth grade student receives an application populated with his/her final grades from seventh grade, his/her reading and math scores on the most recent standardized test, his/her absences, home address, and zoned high school.

Conversely, Mr. Christianson, the guidance counselor for Academy “C” rushed through a brief summary of the application process when he handed out the applications to students during the last five minutes of the period. For his part, Mr. Pedraza, guidance counselor for Academy “B” preferred meeting with students in groups of five to discuss their interests, review the *Directory*, and have what he described as “a more personalized conversation” about what high school meant to the students and how to identify schools that would be a good fit. Finally, Ms. Perolli, of Academy “D” held an assembly for the entire eighth grade in her academy where she used overhead materials to cover a series of key points about the application process. She, like Mr. Sanchez, discussed strategies for improving one’s chances of getting matched to a competitive school.

The school principal never once inquired about what the guidance counselors did to inform students and families about the high school choice process. As the leader of a “School in Need of Improvement⁶,” his time and energy were focused on meeting “Adequate Yearly Progress” for the second year in a row in the hopes of getting the school removed from the punitive list. Without instructions or supervision from the him or their assistant principals or mandates from OSEPO, it was up to each guidance counselor to share whatever information and tips he/she deemed important and dedicate the amount of time he/she saw fit to assisting students with high school applications. Under considerable pressure to provide all students with a minimum amount of information, the guidance counselors relied on communication methods which would allow them to reach the largest audience in the shortest amount of time. As a result, there was negligible individualized counseling regarding students’ high school choices.

⁶ The state education department gives this designation to schools that have failed to meet performance measures (AYP) for more than two consecutive years. Sanctions range from undergoing restructure to the removal of the principal.

Even in the case of students in Academy “B,” the small group meetings lasted only fifteen minutes and few students actually had their blank or completed applications in hand at that time.

For a student to receive personal attention and assistance with his/her application, he/she had to seek out a counselor and make explicit requests for recommendations and guidance. Some students did in fact take advantage of this opportunity to speak one-on-one with a guidance counselor about high schools. In general, it was the higher performing students and those in honors classes who availed themselves of this additional support. Furthermore, on multiple occasions, I witnessed guidance counselors making comments that might have discouraged students from asking for help. For example, when students were talking during one of Mr. Sanchez’ presentations, he yelled at them to listen because he didn’t “Want [them] coming to my office asking the same questions over and over.” Other counselors complained, both directly to students and about them to other school personnel, because they were frustrated by students’ practice of stopping by their offices and interrupting their work to ask for help or clarification on something related to the application. In the end, the amount of guidance and the quality of information that a student received from school-based sources was dependent on the luck of the draw of guidance counselors and his/her own initiative in seeking out assistance.

Reducing Administrative Burdens by Focusing on School Location and Application Deadline

While the guidance counselors at IS 725 differed quite dramatically in the amount of time and energy they committed to the high school application process, they all focused on achieving two core goals: minimizing the number of appeals that students and parents would request and collecting all of the applications before the December deadline. In fact, these two goals seemed to be the driving forces behind how each counselor approached his/her work on high school choice. It became apparent that managing and containing the administrative demands associated

with the high school application took precedence over activities related to counseling students about which high schools would be most appropriate for them.

Minimizing the number of appeals was a top priority for guidance counselors. Fewer requests for appeals translates into less work on high school applications in the supplementary rounds and fewer hours spent responding to parents' and students' complaints. In an effort to stave off the possibility of families' wanting to make an appeal, guidance counselors emphasized school location as an essential criterion for students to consider when evaluating a school. Nearly every time I watched a guidance counselor speak to students about the high school application, either individually or in groups, he/she mentioned the importance of considering school location and visiting websites such as hopstop.com to get estimated travel times. Some guidance counselors even recommended that students travel to different schools during regular school transit times to experience the distance directly.

It was not a secret that the guidance counselors aimed to limit the number of appeals; they were explicit about their strategy to focus on location and their reasons for doing so. Ms. Perolli explained:

Every year they put a school down, and they don't go travel to see how far it is. And then when they get it, they decide it is too far...I tell them if you put it on there [the application] that means you want to go. I put it everywhere that they should watch travel time, call the school, take a Saturday [to make the trip.] I give them numbers to call and websites. Then the parents come in [to request an appeal.]

In striking contrast to the ubiquitous commentary about the importance of school location, there was virtually no discussion of school quality as a factor to be considered in school selection. The guidance counselors' lack of reference to traditional measures of school performance such as graduation rates, Regents passing rates and college acceptances or even to newer metrics like the various accountability reports is particularly surprising in the light of the

New York City Department of Education's substantial investment in creating school-level Progress Reports and Quality Reviews and making them publicly available. Yet, facing significant pressure to meet application deadlines and balance a host of other responsibilities, middle school guidance counselors made a rational decision to focus on that aspect of the application process that had demanded the most of their time in years past: requests for appeals of high school matches based on location.

Guidance counselors also dedicated substantial energy to reminding students about the application deadline and tracking down students in the days immediately after it was due. In some cases, guidance counselors even misled students by telling them that those people who turned in their applications first had a better chance of getting their top choices. Significantly, guidance counselors were aware that tardiness in entering applications into the computer system was one of the few ways that NYCDOE administrators outside of the school building could track what they were doing.

I: If you see that a student only has a few schools listed, do you do anything?

Ms. Perolli: I don't really do too much about that...I'm just happy they got the damn thing in. Because they send the principal a memo with the names of the kids who don't have applications entered. That's another problem. So I just want to get them all in.

Not coincidentally, the emphasis that the OSEPO administrators placed in the interview on the issue of meeting the application deadline did indeed trickle down to the school-level.

Guidance Counselors' Perceptions

Guidance counselors spent much of the fall semester working on tasks related to the high school choice process. They intensely disliked this part of their job and saw it as burdensome responsibility divorced from their primary vocation as counselors. The limited research that exists about guidance counselors in the United States has shown that they tend to view

themselves primarily as mental health agents (Carroll, 1985). The shift of counseling programs from education departments to psychology departments over the course of the last few decades, which was accompanied by an increased emphasis on family and clinical training, has only bolstered the development of this counselor identity (Huey, 1987). This was true of the guidance counselors at IS 725 whose negative reactions to the high school choice process can be explained in part by their feeling that it got in the way of the more important and rewarding aspects of their job: helping students negotiate the tricky world of adolescence. In fact, this reaction is similar to what researchers have documented about counselors across the country, particularly at the high school level: they tend to dislike college advising and believe that they should not be responsible for doing it (McDonough, 2005).

Time and time again, the guidance counselors complained about the hours spent engaged in tedious administrative tasks. Ms. Perolli stated outright that she “hated” this part of her job, and all five of the guidance counselors separately told me that they could not wait until all of the applications were turned in and entered into the computer. Mr. Sanchez conveyed the underlying sentiment most clearly when he said, “It’s a lot of work...It’s not hard, it just takes up time. It keeps me from doing other things...If we were just focusing on counseling and helping kids with their issues, it [job as guidance counselor] would be a piece of cake.” Mr. Sanchez contrasted his work on the high school application with his other duties as a counselor, which he believed actually help students.

Because the administrative responsibilities connected to the high school choice process were so great and the school administration directed few resources to assist guidance counselors with it, their role was basically reduced to managing paperwork and entering data into the computer system. They did not see high school choice as an opportunity to engage in

meaningful discussions with adolescents about their educational trajectory or about the transition to high school. They also didn't mention the potential benefit to students of working directly with a counselor to identify high schools that were most suited to their particular needs. A chance for guidance counselors to connect with youth and their families and support them through this important decision-making process is therefore lost.

Students' Experiences and Parent Involvement in the High School Choice Process

Reports from low-income and immigrant-origin eighth grade students at IS 725 about how they selected high schools and who helped them make decisions reveal the inaccuracies of the NYCDOE's theorized model of joint student-parent school searching and decision-making. These accounts demonstrate that, on their own, some students and families are not engaging in the steps the NYCDOE believes to be most effective for making appropriate choices. Ultimately, these narratives serve to bolster the claim that the NYCDOE's conceptualization of its role vis a vis the high school choice process as one of information disseminator may be too limited to achieve the goals of choice and equity. Some students and families require more intensive support in making school choice decisions than what is currently in place, and they rely on school personnel to lead the way in providing it.

Negligible Parental Participation in High School Selections

Emilio's experience filling out the high school application in late fall of his eighth grade year was typical of the stories I heard from the students I interviewed over the course of two application cycles. The U.S.-born son of Mexican immigrant parents, Emilio was the eldest child and the first in his immediate family to go through the high school choice process. His narrative of how he identified schools and who was involved in helping him make decisions deviated from the NYCDOE's version of what the process should look like. During the

interview, which took place two days before the deadline for students to hand in their completed applications, I asked Emilio to tell me about how he picked the schools on his list:

I: Ok, so when you were actually filling out your application, who was involved in picking those schools?

R: I filled it out on my own, and then, I haven't shown it to my parents yet. I have to.

I: No? And how come?

R: I don't know, I just haven't...filled it out yet so I have to fill it in...It's due this Friday, I think.

So, with two days left before the deadline, Emilio's parents had not even seen the high school application. Other students admitted to never showing the application to parents at all and to forging their parents' signatures before returning it to the guidance counselors. In cases where students failed to bring in a signed application by the deadline, guidance counselors sometimes resorted to calling parents on the phone to get oral consent to input the schools that the students had listed on the application or to select their zoned high school, which for students at IS 725 meant they would be assigned to one of the lowest performing schools in the city.

Later on in the interview, I asked Emilio again about his parents' participation in the choice process, and he provided more detail on his discussion with them about it:

I: Have your parents been involved in this at all?

R: Umm, I told them what they told me at school. To choose wisely and stuff. And they [his parents] told me to review it and...I just filled it out, the application.

I: Ok, and did they have any questions about which schools?

R: No.

Contrary to the way the New York City Department of Education has envisioned the process, Emilio did not work with his parents to research schools and discuss various options.

Instead, Emilio's friends and classmates played a central role in his decision-making. When asked to identify the top three people who influenced his choices, Emilio named two friends and his god brother, a recent high school graduate himself. Receiving minimal assistance from one's parents in selecting high schools was the norm among my diverse student sample, including both high and low performing students. In fact, as a student in an honors class, Emilio represented the upper end of the scale in terms of achievement. Yet, a similar version of this story was repeated in nearly all of the student interviews I conducted with recently arrived immigrants and second generation children of immigrants alike.

Parents' Limited Understanding of the Choice Process

In the case of Maribel, another eighth grade student at IS 725 who had arrived in New York City from the Dominican Republic three years earlier, the decision about which high schools to select was left entirely up to her. This could be explained, in part, by the fact that her mother was unfamiliar with the details of the application process.

I: And do you talk to your mom at all about this [the application process]?

R: Yeah, she said that anything I want, she will accept it.

Throughout the interview Maribel sounded confident with her choices and did not express regret at not having had more direct guidance from her mother about the application. She also made clear that her mother had a very limited understanding of the how the application process actually works. Maribel's experience of choosing without a parent's input and of having a parent who knew very little about the application was widespread among my respondents.

I: And what about your mom? Does she know about the process?

R: Um, she knows that you're supposed to put the school that you want to go to and if they accept you they tell you in April.

Toward the end of the interview, I asked Maribel if she thought her mother would be willing to do an interview with me about her experiences as a parent with the application process. In this response Maribel emphasized her mother's lack of knowledge:

I: I think I'd like to talk to your mom to hear her perspective. Do you think she might be willing to do an interview some time?

R: She doesn't come to school much.

I: No, I could come to your house or I could meet her at a café and invite her for coffee.

R: She doesn't know that much. She only knows that you put...and then they tell you if you are accepted. 'Cause she only cares, like, if where you want to go that's where will accept you.

In contrast to her mother's limited role in the high school application process, Maribel described her mother as broadly supportive of her education and her goals.

I: And what about your mom, what are her...what does she want you to do [professionally, in the future]?

R: She just tells me that I could be anything. She says, so, I remember I used to want to be a veterinarian, she's like, 'Oh, ok.' Then I want to be an artist, she's like, 'Oh, ok.'

In this way, Maribel revealed a supportive role for parents that many students mentioned, both as it related directly to the high school choice process or to their educational aspirations more generally.

Parental Support as Symbolic Involvement

In students' accounts of their experiences choosing high schools parents rarely played prominent and directive roles like those prescribed by the NYCDOE. At the same time, however, the vast majority of students did make reference to receiving support from parents during the process, and this took a variety of forms. In describing parents' supportive behavior, students often cited symbolic acts—words of encouragement, accompaniment to an audition or high school fair. For example, Carmen, an eighth grade student at IS 725 who had migrated to

New York City from the Dominican Republic four years earlier, explained her mother's participation in those terms. First, though, she told me that she had worked alone to determine which schools to list on her application:

I: So who helped you figure out which schools to put down?

R: Uh, I did it all myself.

But later, when asked who helped her throughout the process, Carmen named her mother and explained what role she played in helping her.

I: So if you were going to name three people who were most helpful to you in this process, who would they be?

R: My guidance counselor, my mom, and my drama teacher.

I: Your mom, how was she helpful?

R: Because she took me to, she took me to the school [for an audition.] She wait [sic] for me.

Maribel's and Carmen's narratives of parent involvement are representative of the accounts I heard from other students in the sample. The support, motivation and encouragement these students received from their parents throughout the process, while valuable in its own right, did not furnish them with concrete information about schools or tactical strategies to improve their chances of being accepted to their top choices. Moreover, students rarely mentioned parents as resources to whom they could turn for this type of instrumental guidance. Yet, as we have seen, no school-level structures were in place to provide students with easy access to people who could respond to their individualized questions, give opinions about schools, and offer advice on topics such as how to rank schools on the application. Despite the NYCDOE's attempts to widely disseminate information about the high school choice process, its efforts were insufficient to reach all families. These data on poor and immigrant-origin students' experiences

call into question the NYCDOE's expectations of families and its conceptualization of the school system's responsibilities to students in this process.

Discussion

Cultural conceptions of appropriate parental involvement

The NYCDOE relies on a broad set of assumptions about parents' knowledge of their children in the design and implementation of its policy of high school choice. It also maintains an expectation of high levels of parental involvement which is at times erroneous and, in some instances, counterproductive to its avowed mission of equity. The weighty expectations of parents carry with them potentially serious consequences for students whose families do conform to the NYCDOE's definition of roles—either because they do not agree with the demands of the process, do not understand them, or are unable to meet them, for whatever reason. The NYCDOE provides few structured sources of school-based support to individual students for investigating and selecting appropriate high schools; its views its responsibilities almost exclusively in the realm information dissemination. However, by relying on a normative expectation that all parents will be familiar with their child's academic skills and will take the lead on identifying suitable high schools the NYCDOE is in fact putting some students at a distinct disadvantage. This may be a particularly acute issue for low-income children of Latin American immigrants since research has shown that these parents understand their role in their child's education differently from traditional conceptions of such in the U.S.

There is a growing body of literature on Latin American immigrants' involvement in their children's schooling in the United States that examines how educational policies and normative assumptions come into conflict with diverse cultural models and structural constraints. From a cultural perspective, research has shown that many poor Latin American immigrant parents with

low levels of education tend to defer to teachers and school administrators on academic matters which they believe to be outside of their realm of expertise and authority (Delgado-Gaitan 1992; Reese et al., 1995; Stanton-Salazar 2001; Suarez-Orozco 1989; Valdes 1996; Valencia & Black 2002). Following the traditional hierarchies and cultural scripts in their countries of origin, parents treat teachers as educated professionals who know best about academic decisions for their children and they make few demands or requests on behalf of their children. Conversely, parents are responsible for the moral education of a child at home, and their primary duties lay in teaching children to be respectful, honorable people. This well-defined division of labor—in which teachers and school administrators manage academic matters and parents are understood to be moral educators—is encapsulated in the concept of *educación* that exists in many Latin American cultures. Sociologist Angela Valenzuela (1999) explains:

Educación is a conceptually broader term than its English language cognate. It refers to the family's role of inculcating in children a sense of moral, social, and personal responsibility and serves as the foundation for all other learning. Though inclusive of formal academic training, *educación* additionally refers to competence in the social world, wherein one respects the dignity and individuality of others... (p.23).

Thus, in the case of the high school choice process, the NYCDOE has envisioned a role for parents that may be quite divergent from the ways in which some families naturally function and approach educational decisions.

Institutional Roles

The NYCDOE has restricted its involvement in high school choice to disseminating information. Furthermore, it has not created any formal requirements or incentives for schools to provide personalized guidance to individual students and families. As a result, the NYCDOE has set the stage for reproducing unequal access to high quality educational opportunities rather than reducing it through a policy of school choice due to extant disparities in parental engagement and

familial resources. In fact, an analysis from the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education at New York University indicates that school choice in New York City may be perpetuating educational inequality. In their report, Meade, Gaytán and Noguera (2009) show that Black and Latino students in New York City tend to be concentrated in high schools that received the worst evaluations from the city, and the authors attribute this trend in part to the high school choice process. The consequences of attending a lower performing high school in New York City are considerable since some schools have four-year graduation rates as low as forty percent.

With high school choice in New York City, the district assumes a degree of cultural capital that not all families universally possess. Knowledge about the range of educational options available and their variable academic quality, where to locate this information, or familiarity with strategies to improve one's chances of getting accepted to a competitive school all constitute a form of cultural capital that relates to educational advancement. Families who possess and can active this cultural capital may be better positioned to successfully participate in school choice and have their child matched to a school with which they are ultimately satisfied.

Student interviews provide strong evidence of the extent to which the NYCDOE's theorized version of the choice process departs from reality for some families. Its focus and investment in information dissemination appear misplaced and out of step with the type of support and assistance that some students and families need for this process to be truly equitable. The abundant literature on low-income, minority and immigrant families' reliance on school-based sources of information about school choice and other educational matters (Andre-Becheley, 2005; Hill, 2008; Lareau, 2003; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Teske, Schneider, Roch, & Marschall, 2000; Teske, Fitzpatrick, & Kaplan, 2007) points to schools as a logical base from which these support services could be launched.

A more structured guidance role does not necessarily mean less autonomy or freedom of choice for parents. In fact, in this case, greater institutional intervention may actually be necessary for genuine choice to be exercised.

This research shows that some school guidance counselors prefer counseling responsibilities to administrative ones and identify most strongly with the therapeutic aspects of their job. Consequently, replacing some of the guidance counselors' bureaucratic tasks with mandated parent meetings about how to work with their child to complete the high school application may simultaneously address two current issues: parents' lack of understanding and limited instrumental participation in the high school choice process and guidance counselors' dissatisfaction with the burdens of the process. By counseling students and parents directly on school choice decisions, school personnel may also help families generate valuable cultural capital that they can use to negotiate the choice process and other aspects of the education system. For example, through personal discussions, parents can learn about the school system's expectations of parental participation in their children's schooling, be made aware of other unarticulated norms and practices, and be introduced to strategies for pursuing high quality educational opportunities which they can apply in other contexts such as the search for post-secondary schooling options. These direct encounters between school personnel and families may actually serve to promote immigrant integration as well since they offer concrete instruction about bureaucratic rituals, social conventions and cultural cues—elements of social life with which people of immigrant backgrounds tend to be less familiar.

Conclusions

In this paper I analyzed one urban district's school choice policy and low-income immigrant students' experiences with it to shed light on the important role that social institutions

such as schools can play in promoting immigrant integration. Moreover, I identified a theoretical intersection between cultural capital and immigrant integration by demonstrating their conceptual similarities in relation to participation in high school choice in New York City.

While this paper leaves a host of unanswered questions about what it would take to implement an equitable school choice policy, it also introduces multiple directions for future research.

Schools serving low-income, immigrant-origin students frequently cite the lack of parent involvement as a serious problem (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valdes, 1996). The middle school in this study was no exception. However, this research exposed a different, less visible form of parent involvement that provides evidence of parents' interest and investment in their children's education. Their symbolic forms of participation in the high school choice process reveal a foundation of interest on which interventions could build. Future studies should investigate immigrant parents' ideas about education and their understanding of what is required for educational and professional advancement. Researchers should also examine the cultural and structural barriers to parent involvement in order to identify novel ways to engage parents and help policy-makers develop innovative policies to support their participation.

Public institutions are often ill-equipped to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse constituency. Third party institutions such as community and faith based organizations represent valuable partners and potential collaborators who bring a different set of resources and experiences to the table. The possibilities for collaborations between public institutions and the non-profit sector to promote integration and combat educational inequality have received insufficient scholarly attention. Studies of successful partnerships would greatly expand our

knowledge of how social sectors can come together to support disadvantaged students' education and promote immigrant integration into various sectors of society.

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