**Convenience, Location, and Perceptions of School Quality: Examining the Role that Transportation Plays in School Choice Decisions**

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**Abstract**

Access to transportation serves as a significant factor for school choice and educational equity. In this paper, we examine the role of transportation in New York City parents' school choice decisions. The focal district has inadequate public transit options for parents to use for school commuting purposes; thus, we compare how White and/or high-income “gentrifier” parents make sense of their school choice decisions in terms of transporting their children to their local schools vs. choice schools far from home. We find some parents use private and costly transportation to avoid their local schools that enroll mostly low-income, Latinx and Asian students. Other parents chose to enroll their children in the local schools because of convenience and lifestyle reasons. Understanding parents’ school choices through the lens of transportation can show how advantage in school choice systems is reproduced and the need for policymakers to adopt more equitable transportation policy.

**Introduction**

**Objectives**

The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision changed the landscape of public education nationally. The Supreme Court decision declared that segregated public schools were unconstitutional. Since then, public school districts around the country have grappled with the issue of desegregating schools in the face of resistance from White parents. The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision caused the term “busing” to become synonymous with school desegregation (Delmont, 2016). Many White parents, however, protested the use of busing for integration purposes and advocated for “neighborhood schools” close to home (Johnson, 2019). This framing allowed them to “support white schools and neighborhoods without using explicitly racist language” (Delmont, 2016, p. 3). Because of their vocal demands and the media “vastly exaggerating the number of children who would be bused” (Johnson, 2019, p. 151), the term “busing” became political and polarizing for parents. Many civil rights advocates, including Delmont (2016), claim that “‘busing’ was a fake issue. Students in the United States had long ridden buses to school” (p. 2). White parents use complaints about busing to avoid sending their children to integrated schools (Hannah-Jones, 2019). What these parents fear more than long bus rides is the idea that their children would be attending integrated schools (Delmont, 2016).

To create a system that is fairer for low-income children of color, it is important to understand public opinion when it comes to transportation, integration, and neighborhood interactions at the youngest level of the New York City Public School System. Research has shown that when general support for public and city offered transportation is higher, school transportation programs are more successful (Mindel, 2021). Additionally, nonwhite parents are more likely to be low income, live further from good schools, and therefore value busing more than white parents (Wilson, Marshall, Wilson, & Krizek, 2010). Although many parents value school systems that include school choice, evidence suggests that when choice is expanded so is segregation within the school district (Denessen, Driessena, & Sleegers, 2005). When parents are presented with a plethora of education options for their children, they are forced to reckon with the increased childcare needs that come with sending a child out of their home neighborhood.

In this paper, we examine the role of busing and other transportation considerations in New York City parents' contemporary school choice decisions. The focal district has inadequate public transit options for parents to use for school commuting purposes; thus, we compare how White and/or high-income “gentrifier” parents make sense of their school choice decisions in terms of transporting their children to their local, neighborhood schools versus choice schools far from home.

The research questions motivating this paper are as follows:

(1) How do New York City gentrifier parents describe the role of transportation in their elementary (K-5) school choice decisions?

(2) What were the tradeoffs of opting into local schools vs. opting out for choice options in terms of convenience, location, and perceptions of school quality?

**Framework**

New York City has never really tried to use long-term busing as a solution for widespread school segregation. In the 1960s, about a decade after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Latinx and Black parents across New York City put pressure on the city to create busing plans to diversify schools.  They staged a walkout of 460,000 students, parents, and teachers (Delmont, 2016). New York City responded to the protestors with an integration plan. This plan would pair schools that were mostly Latinx and Black with majority white schools. The city would then transfer students between the two schools to make them both more racially balanced. This plan was not popular with White parents across the city: it was reported that over 10,000 White parents marched in 1964 to oppose this school-pairing plan (Delmont, 2016). The protesters held “signs reading, ‘We oppose voluntary transfers,’ ‘Keep our children in neighborhood schools,’ ‘I will not put my children on a bus’’” (Delmont, 2016, p. 23). White parents framed their resistance to integration under the idea that they were protecting their right to choose.

Today, New York City operates under a school choice system. In this system, parents can choose from a variety of different types of schools including zoned, charter, gifted-and-talented, and dual-language school programs. Therefore, the school choice system allows parents to leave neighborhood schools close to home for choice options farther away. Proximity to school affects parents' choices because of transportation costs and childcare challenges (Jacobs, 2013). Concerns over childcare when sending children to schools can leave working parents with less accessibility to education programs that are not in their neighborhoods (Jarvis & Alvanides, 2008). Access to public transportation is also an important variable for school choice and segregation, particularly in *choice-rich districts* like New York City (Sattin-Bajaj, 2018). Choice-rich districts offer parents with a variety of accessible, high-quality schooling options to choose from for their child.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to further researchers’ understanding of how parents with privilege value transportation when making decisions in a school choice system. We want to understand how school transportation motivates parents when they are evaluating their options.

**Methods and Data Sources**

New York City’s school system is racially and socioeconomically diverse; yet, the public schools are severely segregated due to housing policy, school catchment boundaries, and deregulated school choice policy (Hemphill & Mader, 2015; Kucsera & Orfield, 2014). The focal neighborhood for this study is called Prospect Point (pseudonym) which is one of the most racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse neighborhoods in the city. In 2018, roughly 75% of Prospect Point residents were Latinx and Asian, 20% White, and 5% Black. Education options and schools for parents in Prospect Point do not reflect balanced diversity (See Table 1). The most popular options included dual language or general education programs in the local schools, and themed charter schools or gifted and talented (G&T) programs located outside of the neighborhood.

Table 1: Parent interviews.

Table

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In New York City, public school students are offered access to Student MetroCards, which provide free rides on any subways, ferries, and busses across the city as a form of school transportation. Although public transportation is extensive across New York City, in the Prospect Point neighborhood, using public transportation to get to school can be difficult. This makes it a perfect site to study perceptions of transportation in the context of school choice. There is only one main subway line that services the neighborhood, and parents explained that the subway and public buses do not take them directly to any of the choice schools. Parents who chose a charter school or G&T program located outside of the neighborhood had to either use their own private cars or pool funds with other families to pay for a privately chartered bus or van for the commute. All the local schools are within 1-mile of parents’ homes; therefore, students walk or bike to school.

The data from this paper comes from a larger case study conducted by my mentor on a parent-led pro-neighborhood school group. My mentor is a White public-school parent in a New York suburb and school choice researcher. I am a White student intern from the New York metro area. Forty-five parents were purposefully chosen because gentrifiers tend to hoard opportunities for their children in diverse public-school systems (Roda, 2018; Roda, 2018; Kotok, Frankenberg, Schafft, Mann, & Fuller, 2017), which leads to greater levels of school segregation and inequity (Roda 2018, 2013; Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, & Cucchiara, 2014).

Of the 45 gentrifier parents, 31 parents opted into their neighborhood school and 14 opted out of their local elementary schools (See Table 2). The semi-structured, face-to-face, audio-recorded interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were conducted between December 2016 and October 2017 by my mentor. Interview questions asked parent participants where their children attend school, how they chose that school, and attitudes about choice options. For example, parents were asked, “Can you start with saying your name, your zone school, and the length of time you’ve lived in this neighborhood?”

Observations were conducted at the pro-neighborhood school group meetings where they discussed various school choice topics. Field notes were taken at these meetings about meeting participants, discussion topics, and attendees. Additionally, field notes were taken at public school board meetings for the district.

Table 2: Parent breakdown by neighborhood school and program (*n=31*)

Table

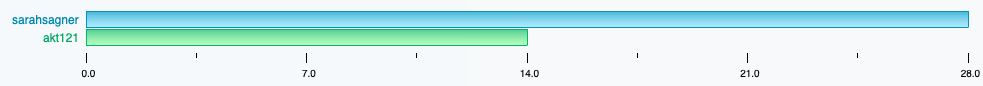
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For this paper, both my mentor and I analyzed the data together through the lens of transportation and school choice. We utilized the computer program Dedoose to organize the interview transcripts and topics into categories and subcategories, themes, and findings (See Table 3). First, we would read the interview transcripts and take detailed notes on the main ideas, concerns, and motivations that the parent interviewed cited as reasons for their education choices. Then, we would group the main details from the conversation into the category or sub-category that most closely related to the parent’s statement. We would take the relevant excerpts from the interview and link it to the proper code in the computer program Dedoose. Next, we analyzed their opinions in the context of where their children attend school. We repeated this process until all 45 interview transcripts were analyzed. Figure 1 shows the number of interview transcripts that I coded (user sarahsagner) and the number of interview transcripts that my mentor coded (User akt121) in Dedoose. Trustworthiness strategies included member checking with two parent participants and peer review.

Table 3: Shows categories and subcategories used in Dedoose computer software

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Category** | **Subcategories** |
| Distance vs. Location |  |
| Benefits of Walking | * Convivence/Family Schedule * Better Health * After School Activities * Friends in Neighborhood * Student Independence |
| Better Familiarity with the Community |  |
| Busing for Desegregation Purposes |  |
| Benefits Everybody |  |
| Keep Resources in Local Schools |  |
| Leaving the Neighborhood/Busing | * Paying for Transportation * Predominantly White Bus Stops |
| Quality vs. Proximity vs. Access |  |
|  |  |

Figure 1. Graph showing the number of interviews my mentor and I each coded.



**Results**

When examining our data in Dedoose, it can be concluded that regardless of where a family chose to send their children to school, “Quality vs. Proximity vs. Access” and “Convenience/Family Schedule” were consistent concerns parents had (See Figure 2). However, few parents’ referenced sending their children to “Predominantly White Bus Stops” or “Student Independence” as important when choosing a school in the context of their transportation accessibility. Therefore, parents valued the apparent social benefits of their school choice over the mobility of their child in the child’s trip to school.

Figure 2: Number of Times Data Was Assigned To Each Code Chart, bar chart

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The first group of parents, whom we call opt-out parents, used private transportation to avoid neighborhood schools with mostly low-income Latinx and Asian students. Another group of gentrifier parents, called opt-in parents, chose to enroll their children in the local schools to make their family’s life “easier.” They felt that walking or biking to school was a “healthier choice” than riding on a bus.

**Opt-out Parents**

Instead of choosing their local public schools, which would help integrate them, the 14 opt-out parents willingly put their children on long bus or car rides, ranging from 30-60 minutes each way, because they believed the choice options were higher quality (less crowded, not as many “limitations”, etc.) compared to the local schools. An opt-out mother stated the following when discussing her children’s commute to schools:

Yes, yeah. We have a bus, but it, um, it gets here, we have to be at the bus stop at 7:15 in the morning, and then it’s, the distance is 2 miles, but the bus takes like 40 minutes in the morning and an hour and a half in the afternoon because it’s the route.

Some of these parents paid thousands of dollars per year for transportation costs. At the same time, ironically, they questioned whether busing for desegregation purposes would work even though they were voluntarily putting their children on buses. For example, an Asian G&T father had two children in two different G&T schools, and said when they were first choosing schools:

“...we weren’t really ready to send them on buses. So, we were kind of turned off by that idea. Obviously, we are now fine with buses.” Later in the interview when asked about segregation in the local schools, he answered: “...there’s only so much you can do. What are you going to do? You’re going to start busing everyone?”

Dealing with transportation back and forth to school was a trade-off that most parents did not enjoy about their school choice decision. Parents had this to say about the bus and/or commute: “biggest pain in the ass”, “biggest hardship”, “the bus headache”, “biggest burden to get to school”, “I wish we could walk”, “really stressful” and "not thrilled” about the bus. Ultimately, opt-out parents considered the perceived quality of the school (which also related to school demographics) over proximity and transportation considerations. When asked about transportation to his children’s charter school, a White father responded:

It’s a problem. I mean, it’s a major pain in the ass. It’s so much easier to walk at 8:00 in the morning to your local school. You know it’s really the biggest hardship of all. Sometimes you wait for a bus really, really early in the morning, terribly early. I think the larger issue is you have all these kids being bussed all over the place. And…some people I know in the neighborhood, they go to the one [G&T program] in [another district]. And they didn’t have a bus, they’re paying for transportation. So, I think it is a big issue.

Indeed, G&T parents had to hire a private van or bus, pool their funds to pay for it, and coordinate bus stops. Parents were willing to spend time and money to avoid sending their children to local schools. A White mother whose child attended the G&T program explained how it works: “We all hire a bus together and I mean there’s several if you come at around 4 o’clock on a weekday there are different pockets of parents waiting for different buses… it’s about $3,000 a year” per child. The use of thousands of dollars to pay for private transportation highlights how access to these choice schools is inaccessible. Many low-income families cannot afford to sacrifice $3,000 each year on school transportation alone. If all families cannot pay for private transportation to school, then the choice system does not actually serve all families. In Prospect Point, choice is only available to those who can afford to pay high private transportation costs.

**Opt-in Parents**

Meanwhile, the 31 opt-in parents in this study believed their local schools were “good” and wanted the convenience and healthy lifestyle of walking or biking with their children to school. While they appreciated the “diversity” in the local schools, convenience and location were often the most important factors in their decision-making process. One White parent’s explanation about why she chose the local school reflected other parents' decisions. She explained that “with two working parents, things get really hairy. So, we honestly were like, we’re just looking to make our lives simpler.” She went on to say:

Like, if it’s not the perfect option but it makes your life easier than that makes such a bigger difference in the health of your family. Like the mental health of your family, then having a more perfect school. I was like, ‘Ok, it might not be spectacular but it’s good. It’s a half block away and people like it, and we’re done.’

Indeed, even with some of the shortcomings of large class sizes and not enough outdoor time in the local schools, her impression was that people are happy there. Opt-in parents believe that they are sending their children to “good-quality” schools, therefore, there is no reason to compromise convenience for schooling. Parents spoke about the benefits of being close to after school activities in the neighborhood and volunteering opportunities in the schools. These parents selected their local schools for practical reasons. For example, an opt-in mother stated:

I also really like being it’s just for practical reasons being in the neighborhood.  Being able to walk or bike to school like we do.  I like being able to get over to the school for meetings.  I would not want my child to be on a bus for two hours like many students do one hour each way to commute out of the neighborhood to be stuck in bad weather. Many parents face some are stranded on a bus that has not made it back.  It’s just we already have such stressful lives.  Let’s not make it worse.”

Another parent said the following when discussing local after-school activities:

We signed them up for [soccer program] which is run out of [local school 1].  Because at least I know they will get a walk everyday they will be picked up at [their school] they’ll get walked to [local school 1], they'll get to do their activities in 69 and then I will have to walk them home.  That was a no brainer.

Parents who opted into the local schools felt that gentrifier parents whose children left for choice options were doing a disservice to the community. A White opt-in father spoke about how his son used to ride a bus for kindergarten, but that he felt: “uncomfortable with the all-White bus stop because that’s not what this neighborhood is like.” He decided to switch to one of the local schools for first grade. When gentrifier parents choose to opt-in to their local schools, they contribute meaningful resources and political power to the local schools.

**Conclusion**

Future research should look at a different population and include the perspectives of different stakeholders in the public education community. For example, this study was limited to the perspectives of parents. Future research should evaluate the perspectives of school educators and administrators as well. Additionally, this study is limited to one very specific population. The Prospect Point community is unique because it has a large Latinx and Asian population and a very small Black population. Therefore, this research cannot be generalized to the overall theory because of its specific applications. However, this research was successful because it can be used by the new mayoral administration as he appoints education policy leaders and advances understanding on how advantaged parents utilize transportation systems.

**Significance of the Study**

Understanding parents’ school choices through the lens of transportation can show how advantage in school choice systems is reproduced and the need for policymakers to adopt more equitable transportation policy. This paper helps to debunk the myth that White parents, the media, and politicians have promoted about busing--describing it as “unrealistic, unnecessary, and unfair” (Delmont, 2016, p. 21) when, in fact, some gentrifier parents are voluntarily putting their children on expensive and long bus rides for what are perceived to be high quality choice schools. It also illuminates the importance of transportation considerations in parents’ school choice decisions, an underexplored area in the field. Understanding what motivates gentrifier parents, who hold significant political power in choice school systems, helps policy makers and researchers understand what steps must be taken to diversify schools. Transportation is at the core of conversations about integration; understanding the value that transportation holds in parental decision making can help develop more successful and well-supported integration plans.

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