PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT & SCHOOL CHOICE POLICIES IN MICHIGAN: A
CRITICAL POLICY ANALYSIS OF CHALLENGES TO ACCESS & EQUITY

By

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation investigates challenges to access and equity embedded within different types of parental engagement policies, including school choice policies, in Michigan. Although many policy proponents claim that policies have the potential to provide more opportunities for marginalized parents, little is known about the access and equity implications of policy language. I apply an original conceptual framework to my exploration of these issues, drawing on Diem & Young's (2015) *five critical concerns of critical policy analysis* and the literature base centering on critical parental engagement studies. I call my framework *critical parental engagement policy studies*. This critical document analysis provides new understandings of the form and content of parental engagement policy documents and the challenges to access and equity that are embedded within policy language. I analyze data from school district parental engagement policies, Michigan's interdistrict student transfer policies (better known in the state as schools of choice), and documents from a regional collaborative schools of choice agreement encompassing twenty districts. I find that policies sometimes widen but more often restrict educational access for marginalized parents. Moreover, parents who already hold social advantages are likely well-positioned to take advantage of new parental engagement opportunities, potentially at the expense of marginalized parents.

To my parents, Mark and Ann Thelen, along with Michael Kern,
who sparked in me a love of learning and a passion for service.

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE DISSERTATION

### Format of the Dissertation

This dissertation manuscript contains several key and interrelated components pertaining to my dissertation project, "Investigating Parental Engagement Policies in Michigan." Introductory materials are included to present necessary general materials that apply to the dissertation as a whole. These sections include an introduction and explanation of motivation of the overall project; rationale for a three-paper dissertation format; brief introductions to papers 1, 2, and 3; an overview of methodological and conceptual foundations; and a general statement of positionality and ethical commitments. My brief explanation of each of the three studies includes a summary, information about the origins of each project, and necessary next steps to bring each one to completion.

The main body of this dissertation includes manuscripts of my three papers. Those manuscripts contain components consistent with typical qualitative study designs, including an introduction; motivation and research questions; conceptual framework; positionality and ethical commitments statement; review of the literature; study design; descriptive findings; critical findings; and discussion. Each of these components is specific to the given study.

### Introduction & Motivation

This work is driven by an understanding that parents and educators are deeply committed to the flourishing of all children in schools. However, I also recognize that different stakeholders can have very different ideas about the best path to supporting students and the educational system as a whole. It is in those different ideas that we may see, upon close and careful examination, the myriad ways in which power fundamentally impacts the social dynamics of

educational institutions and the relationships among the most important players involved (Levinson et al., 2009).

In a spirit of goodwill and support for both parents and educators, I hope that this dissertation project will illuminate the many threats to equity and inclusion that are built into educational policy and offer possible paths to greater educator understanding of parents who are underserved within the US educational system. I also urge policymakers to consider more thoroughly the damaging potential consequences of the laws and policies they create. Policy has the potential to do good, but the historical and contemporary homogeneity of those with seats at the decision-making table diminishes the voices of marginalized parents and threatens to reproduce the very inequities that policy has so often targeted.

Specifically, I examine the topic of parental engagement with schools from multiple angles, all primarily focusing on policy in Michigan. Across these three papers, I leverage a critical epistemological perspective. This includes a unique conceptual framework that synthesizes critical policy analysis (CPA) and ideas from critical parental engagement studies. I use a complementary methodological approach of critical document analysis to deeply investigate the implications of parental engagement policy documents.

My first paper, "Examining district parental engagement policies through critical policy analysis: A comparison of urban and suburban districts in Michigan," analyzes district-level parental engagement policies in Michigan. With many direct ties to Title I's parent and family engagement policy under ESSA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, 2015), I explore the language of a diversity of policies in both urban and suburban districts in Michigan.

In my second paper, "A critical policy analysis of parent access to schools of choice policy in Michigan," I provide a critical analysis of Michigan's interdistrict school choice law

(better known in the state as schools of choice) and the many potential challenges for access and equity that are presented by the policy's language. Although many proponents of the policy argued that interdistrict choice would benefit students who need access to high-quality educational resources the most (Fowler, 1996), the language of the policy gives troubling indications that it is most likely to benefit already-advantaged parents. My third paper provides a view of the real-world implications of Michigan's schools of choice policy.

In "District Roles, Parent Access, and Equity in a Regional Collaborative School Choice Agreement in Michigan," I engage in a critical document analysis approach that also draws on some aspects of critical discourse analysis. This study investigates the history and contemporary context of the schools of choice environment in the Kent Intermediate School District (ISD). All twenty public districts within the ISD participate in this agreement, in which districts share a common application and share enrollment information with the public through the ISD. I examine document data and supplementary newspapers to analyze the access and equity implications of this agreement.

Despite some important differences across papers, there are equally important similarities that lend themselves to overall coherence and congruence across papers. All three papers address important aspects of parental engagement policies, including both day-to-day parent interactions with their children's education and the specific case of participation in Michigan's schools of choice program. Additionally, each paper takes a critical approach by examining the relationship between policy aims and policy language. Further, all three projects examine and address the many issues regarding educational access and equity.

Taken together, this collection of projects addresses vital issues regarding parent access to educational opportunities for their children and how policies may shape and legitimize some

aspects of parental engagement but not others. These projects also investigate the potential influence of parent voices in educational processes and how some voices may be attended to over others. Even in cases when policies explicitly attempt to protect parental rights, the realities of social stratification in schools present challenges for the equitable representation of the needs, desires, norms, and values of marginalized parents in schools.

This dissertation also fills some other important gaps in the field of educational policy research. For example, little research has been undertaken on the topic of district roles in parent engagement policy implementation. When it comes to parental engagement, all school districts receiving federal Title I funds must have formal policies, created jointly with parents, regarding how the district and its schools will work with parents to support the academic success of students. This Title I policy was enacted decades ago, but there is still little research that addresses the policy documents themselves.

Districts have an additional, highly influential role in Michigan in the area of school choice, with the state's schools of choice law giving districts the right to choose to participate and set several parameters around that participation. In turn, parents living within the same ISD or contiguous ones may apply to transfer to districts with open seats. There is also little qualitative research on schools of choice and school districts as administrative bodies, educational institutions, and unique municipal jurisdictions. A thorough literature search reveals that just a handful of publications exist on school districts and schools of choice. Further, much of this research dates back to before Michigan even had a schools of choice law and instead covers the topic in other states. Taking these parent engagement-related policies into account, districts have important roles to play in parent access and equity issues in schools. More research is needed to better understand how districts undertake these influential policy roles.

Another important contribution to the field is my *critical focus* on schools of choice and my case state of Michigan. While scholarship on the policy in Michigan goes back over two decades (see Arsen et al., 1999), research on schools of choice policy is still scant in comparison to other modes of school choice such as charter schools and vouchers (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012). The work that does exist makes important contributions to our understanding of the logistical and financial implications of schools of choice, but that research has been mostly descriptive in nature and does not engage social theory in its analysis. Work that more explicitly applies social theory is needed to contribute new understandings of the social consequences of schools of choice. I bring an explicitly critical lens to examining choice policy, applying an important set of theoretical and analytical tools in order to interrogate the ways in which power is embedded in both policy documents and their implementation. My critical approach to schools of choice policy directly aligns with my analysis of district parental engagement policies and the critical work that already exists in educational policy analysis.

## Introduction to Papers

The following section includes brief introductions to each of these three projects. These include descriptions of policy background, research questions, study designs, findings, and implications. I also provide a methodology matrix for each paper, which details the connections among my research questions, data sources, methodology, and trustworthiness strategies.

### Introduction to Paper I

This paper, titled, "Examining District Parental Engagement Policies Through Critical Policy Analysis: A Comparison of Urban and Suburban Districts in Michigan," investigates district parental engagement documents to understand how districts codify the rights and responsibilities of stakeholders and examines the context of these policy documents to

understand their potential equity implications. My study explores the following research questions:

- 1. What is the form and content of district-level parental engagement policies?

- 2. How do the policies of urban districts compare and contrast with policies from suburban districts?

- 3. What power dynamics are revealed by the form, content, and accessibility of these policies?

I leverage critical document analysis methodology and apply a conceptual framework of critical policy analysis and the hegemonic ideal of parental engagement to analyze district parental engagement policy documents. My collection of policy data includes school board parental engagement policies and district parental engagement plans from three metropolitan areas in Michigan. Each metropolitan area includes one urban and one suburban district, for a total of six districts and twelve policies. Findings indicate that several districts use templates for their policies, and there are many striking similarities between urban and suburban districts. Policies generally lack language that specifically addresses equity issues. Further, policies center the perspective of schools and outline activities that are highly traditional and narrow in scope. This study has important implications for policy and practice, as the policy language does not go far enough in addressing the historical and contemporary injustices faced by marginalized parents, despite the intent of the policy to increase equity opportunities. This lack of explicit discussion of equity goals makes it likely that these policies will reproduce social stratification and perhaps even worsen it.

Table 1: *A Methodology Matrix for Investigating District Parental Engagement Policies*

| What do I need to know? (research questions) | Why do I need to know this? (goals) | What kind of data will answer these questions? | Methodology | Addressing trustworthiness |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Q1: What is the form and content of district-level parental engagement policies?** | descriptive: understanding the physical nature of the policies and the language used. | collection of district-level parental engagement policies | critical document analysis | positionality; triangulation; public disclosure; audit trail; peer consultation |
| **Q2: How do the policies of urban districts compare and contrast with policies from suburban districts?** | descriptive: looking for meaningful patterns of similarity and difference among policies from different types of districts. | collection of policies from urban and suburban districts | critical document analysis | same |
| **Q3: What power dynamics are revealed by the form, content, and accessibility of these policies?** | critical: examining how policy docs are made available; evaluating the access and equity implications of the policies, including how they might reproduce oppression | collection of policies; district and school websites | critical document analysis | same |

## Introduction to Paper II

This paper, titled, "A Critical Policy Analysis of Parent Access to Schools of Choice Policy in Michigan," investigates Michigan's schools of choice policy documents to understand the language of the documents and the potential challenges to access and equity embedded within the documents. My study explores the following research questions:

1. How does the language of Michigan's schools of choice policies impact parent access to school choice opportunities?

2. What barriers to access are embedded within the language of the policies? What equity issues are presented by these barriers?

As I do in my paper examining parental engagement policies, I leverage critical document analysis methodology and apply a conceptual framework of critical policy analysis and the hegemonic ideal of parental engagement to analyze Michigan's schools of choice policy documents. My data sources include Section 105 of Michigan's School Aid Act, which regulates student transfers within the same intermediate school district; Section 105c, which regulates

student transfers to contiguous intermediate school districts; and a state-produced summary document for non-policymakers. Findings illuminate access and equity concerns in several important areas, including information; process and logistics; explicit exclusion; district gatekeeping; social and emotional barriers; and important omissions regarding equity issues. As with my parental engagement policy study, this study indicates important policy and practice implications. Policy language within the documents contains many provisions that could greatly limit the access of many parents to choice opportunities. Because these policies do not explicitly address and engage equity issues, the policies may actually perpetuate inequities.

Table 2: *A Methodology Matrix for Investigating Parent Access to Michigan's Schools of Choice Policy*

| What do I need to know? (research questions) | Why do I need to know this? (goals) | What kind of data will answer these questions? | Methodology | Trustworthiness Strategies |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Q1: What are the form and content of Michigan's schools of choice policy documents? | descriptive: learn about what these policies look like, how information is shared, what language is used | Section 105 and 105c; policy guidance doc produced by MDE | critical document analysis | positionality; public disclosure; audit trail; peer consultation |
| Q1: How does the language of Michigan's interdistrict school choice policies impact parent access to school choice opportunities? | descriptive: examine the form and content | Section 105 and 105c; policy guidance doc produced by MDE | critical document analysis | same |
| Q2: What barriers to access are embedded within the policies? What equity issues are presented by those barriers? | critical: examining context and the ways in which the policy may reproduce social inequities | Section 105 and 105c; policy guidance doc produced by MDE | critical document analysis | same |

**Introduction to Paper III:**

This critical document analysis, titled, "District Roles, Parent Access, and Equity in a Regional Collaborative School Choice Agreement in Michigan," investigates the historical and contemporary context of a collaborative schools of choice agreement among the twenty school districts in Kent ISD in west Michigan. I refer to this policy as the Kent Choice Plan. Although

the vast majority of school districts participate in schools of choice in Michigan, little research exists regarding district participation or regional collaborative agreements in the state. Given the deep impacts of competition for students and the funding attached to them, we need a better understanding of how school districts both compete and collaborate within their schools of choice participation efforts. Just as important, this study interrogates the access and equity implications for parents who wish to transfer their children to different districts. My investigation centers on the following research questions:

1. What are the form and content of policy documents about the Kent Choice Program?

2. What do policy and archival documents reveal about the nature of this agreement and the context behind it?

3. What are the potential parent access and equity implications embedded with the Kent Choice Program's informational and guiding documents?

This study applies my overall dissertation conceptual framework, which synthesizes Diem & Young's (2015) five critical concerns of CPA with concepts from critical parental engagement studies. In answering my research questions, I engage in critical document analysis to examine how the language of policy documents reflect potential implications for parental access to policies and associated equity issues. I also borrow some methodological techniques from critical discourse to provide a better understanding of over twenty years of historical and contemporary context of the policy agreement. Data sources include Kent ISD collaborative agreement documents, district schools of choice websites, and local newspaper archives.

Findings show that over time there was a shift in discourses among district leaders from offering parents educational choices toward using schools of choice policy to bolster district financial viability. Although Kent ISD districts did try to mitigate negative financial impacts on

more urban districts in the early days of the Kent Choice Plan by limiting transfers, those caps were later lifted in response to political pressure and financial considerations. Although many parents have used the policy to transfer their children in the last two decades, several important barriers limit access and may perpetuate advantages for already privileged families. However, findings also show that several families in recent years have purposely chosen to send their children to Grand Rapids Public Schools despite having the opportunity and means to send their children elsewhere. These findings stress the importance of centering a wide range of access and equity concerns in policy, along with considerations of the power dynamics--among both parents and educators--that impact who ultimately benefits from local schools of choice policy. I also discuss the underlying funding issues that lead districts to draw students from other districts in the first place.

Table 3: *A Methodology Matrix for Investigating a Regional Collaborative Schools of Choice Agreement*

| What do I need to know? (research questions) | Why do I need to know this? (goals) | What kind of data will answer these questions? | Methodology | Addressing trustworthiness |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Q1: What are the form and content of policy documents about the Kent Choice Program? | descriptive: learn about what these policies look like, how information is shared, what language is used | Kent Choice Plan policy documents | critical document analysis | positionality; triangulation; public disclosure; audit trail; peer consultation |
| Q2: What do policy and archival documents reveal about the nature of this agreement and the context behind it? | descriptive & critical: what have people said about the agreement over time; decisions about various districts' participation over time | Kent Choice Plan policy documents; Plan website; district schools of choice websites; archival newspapers | critical discourse analysis & critical document analysis | same |
| Q3: What are the potential parent access and equity implications embedded with the Kent Choice Program's informational and guiding documents? | critical: assess what power dynamics are embedded in the policy; learn how the policy might perpetuate already existing inequities and limits on access for marginalized people | Kent Choice Plan policy documents; Plan website; district schools of choice websites; archival newspapers | critical document analysis | same |

## Methodological & Conceptual Foundations

**Methodology**

Qualitative inquiry is the ideal avenue for pursuing answers to my research questions. Qualitative methodologies provide tools to investigate processes, phenomena, and personal experiences in great depth (Creswell, 2018; Maxwell, 2013; Remler & Van Ryzin, 2015). Further, qualitative work offers several differentiated concepts and strategies for answering questions that provide for a diversity of understandings about the same contexts.

These three interrelated projects all draw on aspects of critical qualitative methodology (Denzin, 2017) and its associated methods. While I extensively elaborate on my individual methodological approaches in each of my three papers, I provide here a discussion of the connections across the studies to demonstrate coherence in my overall methodological approach.

My methodological approach centers more specifically on critical document analysis. As 'social facts' of governmental and educational institutions (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997, p. 47), educational policy documents are relevant both as artifacts of social organizing and as guidelines or mandates with potential impacts on educational practice. Policies are also the embodiment of "binding normative discourse" (Levinson et al., 2009). They can reflect priorities, values, needs, and desires of the people who design them, and what is omitted from policy can be just as important and influential as what is included. Policy documents can have impacts that endure for years after their adoption and implementation. While document analysis is an increasingly common approach in many different types of qualitative and mixed-methods studies, research procedures for document analysis often lack extensive, substantive descriptions in the literature (Bowen, 2009). For reasons of both clarity and accountability, I attempt here and in all three of my papers to offer quality descriptions of my methodological procedures.

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Because critical document analysis is a nascent methodology, I largely draw on several aspects of traditional document analysis. I also bring in important epistemological elements of critical discourse analysis in order to incorporate a critical perspective, which I discuss later. Throughout these three studies, I leverage several aspects of traditional document analysis. When examining policy, I employ a systematic approach to reading, coding, analyzing, and interpreting my data (Bowen, 2009; Neuendorf, 2016). My use of a step-by-step procedure is helpful in this kind of work, in which I examined many documents in several different formats. Even before I began reading my data, I also used a systematic process to search for and collect policy documents. This systematicity is largely in-line with common approaches to analyzing other data sources such as interview data and open-ended survey questions. However, the data search process is particularly key in document analysis, as the data analyzed is subject to availability to the researcher.

While I do make use of many elements of traditional document analysis, I draw some important distinctions from that approach. Traditional document analysis is generally descriptive in nature and claims a stance of neutrality and objectivity in evaluating and making claims about findings. Some researchers also take a positivist approach rooted in notions of certainty, arguing that the policy process follows a clear trajectory that can be measured and evaluated. Others take a rationalist approach to investigating policy, claiming that policy actors have specific goals and preferences that drive their actions (Diem & Young, 2015; Diem et al., 2014).

My critical approach features some important contrasting elements. In my research, my critical perspective leads me to ask several questions that interrogate issues of power, privilege, identity, agency, and voice. My focus on access and equity issues in parental engagement policy pushes me to examine these underlying power dynamics and the implications of policy for the

perpetuation of social stratification and inequities. The critical approach bears important epistemological distinctions as well. I question notions of certainty, instead offering my interpretations and conclusions as contributions to an understanding of these topics (Fendler, 2003), not as the only and right perspective. As is typical in critical work, I also attend to my positionality within my research. This means deep reflection upon the many facets of my identity and how those facets shape and inform my work.

**Deductive-Dominant Coding**

Another important aspect of my methodological approach is my use of deductive-dominant coding. As Armat et al. (2018) argue, qualitative analysis is rarely a purely deductive or inductive endeavor. Most studies employ a mix of the two that may highlight one more than the other. In the case of my studies, I directly apply my conceptual framework to my analytical approach, using Diem & Young's (2015) five critical concerns and concepts from critical parental engagement studies as my coding themes. I then consider unanticipated inductive themes that emerge from the data and synthesize those with my starting themes in order to elicit new understandings. This deductive-dominant approach, therefore, still leverages an iterative process that is informed by the literature, driving concepts, and the data itself. Given my literature base, research questions, and available data, this deductive-dominant approach is well-suited for my three projects. To put things concisely, I use critical parental engagement policy studies as a conceptual framework to think about the broad topic of parental engagement policy, and I use it as an analytical framework to think specifically about my data collection and its corresponding contexts.

**Advantages & Limitations of This Approach**

As with any methodological approach, document analysis comes with both advantages and limitations. As Bowen (2009) describes, some important advantages relate to the distance between the data and the researcher. Because researchers do not generate document data, their presence within the study does not change the nature of the data in any way. As contrasting examples, observations may prompt participants to behave differently than they usually would, and researchers bring influence to interview questions and how questions are asked. Other advantages include the exactness of details included in documents and the generally broad coverage that documents can provide.

At the same time, there are some potential limitations to consider. Bowen (2009) points out the documents may contain insufficient detail. Because documents are produced independently of research, they may omit certain details that might be important to a study. This can limit the scope and claims of research. Low retrievability can also be an issue, when certain documents are difficult or even impossible to find. For instance, my first study investigates district parental engagement policies in Michigan, but some of my case districts did not have district-level policies, forcing me to analyze school-level policies for some districts instead. Biased selectivity is also a concern, which can lead researchers to select documents that conform to a researcher's own bias and agenda.

**Trustworthiness**

Considerations of trustworthiness are essential factors of transparency and accountability in research design, and qualitative research has its own common conventions (Anfara et al., 2002, Maxwell, 2013). However, it is important to pursue trustworthiness strategies that are appropriate for any given study design. My selection of each strategy was driven by the nature of

my research questions, study design, and critical worldview. As part of my critical approach, I do not present my work as a representation of what is true or accurate. Rather, I offer a socially constructed contribution to understanding (Fendler, 2003) parental engagement policy and situate that policy within its particular context. As such, my trustworthiness measures give readers tools to evaluate for themselves the procedures that I use and the claims that I make about my findings. I address these issues in each of my three studies, but I note here how I attempt to address this dissertation's general limitations through my trustworthiness strategies.

Conceptualization and discussion of my positionality is an essential step that supports the trustworthiness of my research. It is also a staple of the critical worldview that I apply to my research (Anfara et al., 2002). This reflection on my subjectivity as a person and researcher gives readers the opportunity to consider how my positionality influences the end products of my work (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). As I discuss in my statement of positionality and ethical commitments, these three projects focus on exposing how oppression is embedded within parental engagement policy documents. My priorities stem from a recognition of my own privilege and my desire to use the power inherent to that privilege to unearth often-hidden forms of oppression in policy and explore their implications.

Other trustworthiness measures relate more directly to my research process. In each of my studies, I exercise public disclosure. According to Anfara et al. (2002), public disclosure entails describing and showing "how research questions are related to data sources, how themes or categories are developed, and how triangulation is accomplished" (p. 30). Throughout my projects, I provide both descriptions of these processes and visual representations of them. I demonstrate the direct connections among my research questions regarding parental engagement policy, how I use my collection of policy documents, and how I conduct my coding procedures.

Memoing has been an important component of my research process throughout these studies as well. This practice has helped me maintain a record of important insights and decisions that I have made along the way, providing a detailed record for review by colleagues and me (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Maxwell, 2013). Taken together, this set of accountability practices also supports an audit trail for evaluations of every aspect of my projects (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Other trustworthiness strategies more specifically address my process of moving through my study designs. I employ a triangulation strategy in my first and third project, drawing on data from multiple sources and jurisdictions. Using multiple types of data sources provides different perspectives on the same topics (Maxwell, 2013). In all of my projects, I collected different types of documents from multiple sources. At the same time, my use of document analysis methodology necessarily means that my sources encompass only documents. While I do analyze several different types of documents, this relatively narrow scope is an important limitation to consider. I address this limitation through an in-depth, iterative, and multilayered analysis process that includes process documentation. I engage in both descriptive and critical analyses of all my data, providing a level of thoroughness that supports my claims (Leavy, 2017).

Finally, peer consultation and debriefing have been an essential trustworthiness strategy throughout my research process. This approach has provided the opportunity for external feedback from research experts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Remler & Van Ryzin, 2015) and has been especially important for my learning as a novice researcher. I have consulted with colleagues during every stage of my research, including literature gathering about parental engagement policy; conceptualization of explanatory theories and concepts; selecting appropriate methodology, methods, and data sources; analysis of parental engagement policy documents; and

interpretation of findings. This comprehensive approach helped me engage in research as an interactive process, repeatedly visiting literature, study design, data, and analysis to develop an increasingly clear picture of the challenges to access and equity for marginalized parents that are embedded in parental engagement policy documents.

## Conceptual Framework

### Conceptual Underpinnings: CPA and Critical Parental Engagement Studies

Before moving forward, I should address how I conceptualize and take up the term *critical* as an integral aspect of my CPA-focused work. For this definition, I draw heavily on Diem et al.'s (2014) oral history investigation of CPA researchers. The authors argue, "Within the critical paradigm, knowledge is seen as socially constructed, and facts, it is argued, should be explored within historical, political, and social contexts" (p. 1082). In this quote, we see an epistemological framing of the CPA perspective, one that challenges positivist notions of certainty and takes careful steps to situate policy within its broader context. The authors further note CPA researchers' critical focus on "challenging status quo beliefs and understandings, and focusing on issues of power and inequality to capture the complexities of oppression impacting marginalized people (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005)" (p. 1082). The interrogation of power and oppression of marginalized communities is the express interest of all three of the projects that I present here, putting my research purposes in direct alignment with Diem et al.'s (2014) conceptualization of critical research. In particular, my work focuses on the marginalized parent groups for whom the parental engagement policies I investigate are most consequential: people of color, people living in poverty, people with disabilities, immigrants, and English language learners.

It is also important to acknowledge the history of CPA scholarship and consider where the field is heading. As Diem et al. (2014) describe, a particular set of authors are common sources of thought within CPA, including Foucault, Bourdieu, and Freire. At the same time, some researchers interviewed for that oral history study noted that they were moving beyond citing those foundational thinkers, in some instances because of disagreements with their perspectives. However, the predominant impetus for the scholars interviewed was the desire to incorporate more and newer perspectives in order to push thinking about educational policy further and to attend to other important issues of power. Diem et al. (2014) argue, "The consensus from the scholars we interviewed was that in order for a field like critical policy analysis to survive, scholarship and theory must continue to grow and evolve" (p. 1081). In the same vein, they describe CPA as "a field in motion" (1080). This fluidity gives scholars room to explore new ideas and incorporate them into fresh analyses. Within my own work, this flexibility has enabled my own thinking and scholarship to evolve, even within the relatively short duration of my doctoral program.

This evolution of CPA has taken on many forms, as scholars often couple their CPA approaches with other conceptual and theoretical frameworks. A few of these complementary frameworks taken up include CRT (Horsford, 2019), feminist theory (Mansfield et al., 2014), and decolonial theory (Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016). In order to study issues of power and oppression specifically within parental engagement policy in my study, I draw on critical parental engagement literature. Taken together, the coupling of these approaches has major advantages. CPA gives me important tools to analyze policy issues like agenda setting, policy development, policy rhetoric, the involvement of different stakeholder groups, policy implementation, and consequences.

As with all theoretical approaches to research, CPA does come with some limitations. CPA comes with a certain level of conceptual messiness. As Diem et al. (2014) argue, "Indeed, the work of most critical research blurs rather than embraces strong theoretical lines" (1070). Although this complexity is not inherently negative, it presents some challenges to succinct and comprehensive description. As is evidenced by the fact that most researchers couple it with another theoretical or conceptual perspective, CPA also needs deeper development and conceptualization before it accrues the language, debate traditions, and critique associated with older, more well-established approaches. Further, the field would benefit from an unpacking of the history of this perspective and interrogate its roots in scholarship that initially attended far more to issues of class and often excluded very necessary considerations of race and other social identities. With this understanding, I engage with CPA work in ways that are novel but, in my opinion, well-suited to my investigations of parental engagement policy issues.

CPA involves epistemological elements that are common to many critical research approaches. It urges awareness of, reflection on, and disclosure of researcher positionality. It also involves a rejection of technicist approaches of fields such as traditional policy research. In this work, I reject notions of certainty in favor of contributions of understanding (Fendler, 2003). Instead of advancing the idea that my research can be replicated and generalized through empirical means, I argue that different methodological approaches and different researchers would likely reach different conclusions than I do. I also embrace the conceptual and analytical messiness of the critical perspective, recognizing policy as a complicated, dynamic, and difficult-to-observe subject of study. Perhaps most importantly, my critical perspective leads me to ask and investigate issues of power, privilege, identity, agency, and voice.

Another major advantage of CPA is that it gives me tools to specifically interrogate educational policy. In the studies I present here, my focus is access and equity issues, investigating how parental engagement policies can have impactful implications for relationships between parents and their children's education. I consider parental engagement policy as both a set of social artifacts that are codified in enduring ways and as a set of processes. Policy does not happen in a vacuum. Instead, policy is a reflection of systemic issues and the influence of individuals. Policy is an embodiment and perpetuation of power (Diem & Young, 2015; Diem et al., 2014), and CPA helps me analyze and conceptualize numerous policy components, such as language, development, implementation, context, and consequences. According to Diem & Young (2015), "Critical policy researchers tend to pay significant attention to the complex systems and environments in which policy is made and implemented. Within the critical paradigm, knowledge is seen as socially constructed, and facts, it is argued, should be explored within historical, political, and social contexts (Ball, 1991; Young, 1999; Young & Diem, 2014)" (p. 843-844). For all of these reasons, CPA is an ideal basis for conceptualizing my projects and situating them within existing educational policy scholarship.

Critical policy scholars take up the CPA approach in many different ways. Authors often couple this approach with other critical frameworks, such as Critical Race Theory (CRT), feminist theory, class theory, neocolonialism theory, and critical disability studies (DisCrit). I take up CPA and synthesize it with a body of critical literature that focuses on parental engagement issues. Throughout my papers, I refer to this body of literature as critical parental engagement studies. This body of research represents over twenty-five years of scholarly examination of social relationships within parental engagement activities and power dynamics, along with the application of social theory. However, this literature has not necessarily been

conceptualized as a single, cohesive framework. Work such as Baquedano-López et al. (2013) provides an important foundation for this conceptual and analytical perspective. This literature is ripe for an even deeper, more extensive synthesis and conceptualization.

There are many layers of social issues at work in examining parental engagement and parental engagement policy. These include issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, language, nationality (including tribal membership), and immigration status, to name some. While some scholars use conceptual frameworks that specifically address one or some of these identity groups, I take up a more holistic approach to thinking about and investigating parental engagement policy across social groups. This broad approach has limitations and advantages. Focusing on a broader picture means that I lose some details and nuance within issues, and this conceptual perspective is at times messy and complicated. Unlike some of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks mentioned above, the critical parental engagement perspective does not yet have the same level of conceptual development.

On the other hand, my broad focus has some important strengths. Much like bell hooks' (2000) concept of *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,* my approach digs into the interconnected and intersectional nature of oppression. Other approaches such as CRT are inherently intersectional (Crenshaw, 1990), but I also offer a wide umbrella of conceptual tools to think about the overlapping and often compounding systems of oppression. In general, I focus on the fact that hegemonic forces define a small group of members of an in-group and relegate all others to the margins. This approach also gives me tools to think about how positionality and the predominance of one's power can shift from one setting to another, even as oppressive forces endure. At the same time, I am able to focus closely on parents as a group, their practices of supporting their children, and how policy shapes--or does not shape--the relationships between

parents and educators. Other parental engagement scholars take this more holistic approach to the scope of their work, including research by Baquedano-López et al. (2008) and Calabrese Barton et al. (2004). This literature is complemented by scholars who do take up more identity-specific conceptual frameworks, such as Phelps-Moultrie's (2016) work using Black Parental Protectionism and Matias' (2016) work using critical race parenting.

**Conceptual Framework: Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies**

As is common practice with scholars who employ CPA, my methodological approach is closely tied to the conceptual foundations that drive my research (Diem & Young, 2015). As I have discussed, this set of projects employs a conceptual framework grounded in CPA and the parental engagement literature. More specifically, I leverage Diem & Young's (2015) "5 Critical Concerns" of the CPA approach and map influential concepts of the hegemonic ideal of parental engagement to provide a way of understanding how the dynamics of power, privilege, identity, agency, and voice play out in parental engagement policy. I call this conceptual framework *parental meritocracy of parental engagement policy*. While I discuss in each paper how I apply this framework to each of my dissertation subtopics, the table below provides a visual representation of the CPA concepts I draw upon and how parental engagement issues may play out.

I address my framework in specific ways as it pertains to each paper in each individual manuscript. Those descriptions dig more deeply into the specific parental engagement dynamics that I identify as relevant to each paper. However, I also provide here some description of each of the five critical concerns that I draw upon from Diem & Young's (2015) work. I also briefly contextualize them within the parental engagement policy environment. Although these concerns do come with their own distinct issues, there are also important areas of conceptual overlap

among them. These five concerns are intimately intertwined given the highly complex and widespread nature of policy environments.

*1. Concern regarding the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality.*
Interrogating the differences between what proponents of a policy argue it will do and what the likely or actual consequences of a policy are. Parental engagement policies tend to be formed with equity goals in mind, but weak language and highly traditional implementation lead to little positive change and may even make inequities worse.

*2. Concern regarding the policy, its roots, and its development (context)*
Digging deep into the context of policy, including how it was formed, who the major players are, how policy problems are conceptualized, and the policy environment in which the policy will be enacted. Parental engagement policies--including school choice policies--are often enacted as a result of government mandates, financial pressures, or dominant ideologies.

*3. Concern with the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge as well as the*
*creation of policy "winners" and "losers."*
Examining which stakeholders and entities hold power within a policy environment, both when the policy is developed and when it is enacted. In historical and contemporary school systems contexts, policy tends to favor parents and communities that already have more resources than marginalized ones. This concern is closely related to #4 but represents the context-specific ideas that pertain to this policy and area.

*4. Concern regarding stratification and the broader effect a given policy has on*
*relationships of inequality and privilege.*
 Examining the equity implications of the policy, including the likelihood that a given policy will reproduce harmful social inequalities and inequities. Parental engagement policies are no

different, as already-advantaged parents tend to be better positioned to leverage expanded

opportunities that do not take power and privilege into account. This concern addresses big,

structural ideas that are being reproduced through the policy.

      *5. Concern regarding the nature of resistance to or engagement in policy by members of*

      *non-dominant groups:*

Investigating the counternarrative perspectives of marginalized parents as they do their utmost to

support the learning and wellbeing of their children. Marginalized parents make great efforts

every day to fight oppressive forces within the education system and work toward a successful

future for their children.

**Explanation of the Diagram**

This diagram visualizes how I conceptualize the connections among the individual components

of my conceptual framework. At the top is a unifying idea, critical parental engagement policy

studies. Connected to that in the next level down is Diem & Young's (2015) five critical

concerns. Connected to each of those, in the bottommost tier, are the concepts that I use from the

critical parental engagement literature. The synthesis of these ideas allows me to analyze both

the policy issues at play in each of my three papers and the specific parental engagement issues

that are related to policy.[1] While each paper has its own conceptual framework diagram that

carries greater detail, the figure below gives examples of concepts that I draw on across these

projects.

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[1] See Appendix A for another visual representation of this framework, which includes additional information about examples from the data.

Figure 1: *Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies: A Conceptual Framework*

## Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies: A Conceptual Framework

**5 CRITICAL CONCERNS**

| Rhetoric v Reality | Policy Context | Winners & Losers | Stratification | Resistance to Oppression |
|---|---|---|---|---|

**PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT DYNAMICS**

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Rhetoric of equity<br><br>*Reality of harm<br><br>*Parents as choosers<br><br>*Neoliberal ideology | *Oppression in schools and educational policy<br><br>*Segregation context<br><br>*High district participation<br><br>*Ignoring context of oppression<br><br>*Hegemonic norms around parental engagement activities | *Barriers to access for marginalized parents<br><br>*Introduction of interdistrict competition<br><br>*Complex financial pressures<br><br>*Centering of the school<br><br>*Gatekeeping functions | *Benefits for already-advantaged parents<br><br>*Problematic policy language<br><br>*Reproduction of inequities<br><br>*Marginalization of transfer students<br><br>*Deficit framing | *Parents empowered by knowing their rights<br><br>*Challenging normative notions of achievement and success<br><br>*Tradition of parent activism<br><br>*Marginalized parents support children in essential own ways |

**Statement of Positionality & Ethical Commitments**

For my entire career as a student, the educational system that I have been a part of has been a source of refuge. I grew up in a tiny town in northern Michigan, a rural white enclave that is now considered Trump country. My world was even tinier than the town itself. I attended a small Catholic school from kindergarten through 8th grade, the same school that my father had attended and most of his siblings. That is also where my family and I went to church, so I spent nearly every day of my life on that piece of property that took up a city block. The education I received was intensely traditional in curriculum and pedagogy. That is, my schooling was deeply

rooted in white, middle-class, and generally hegemonic norms and values. My family was poor, and that presented difficulties in my life, but the school was built by white people, for white people. It was built for me.

This close tailoring was something that I needed desperately, though. I just did not totally understand that until years later. I was a very different child, and people's behavior toward me strongly suggested to me that they knew it. I did not realize until I became an adult that I am bisexual, but I certainly stood out as I was growing up as someone who looked and acted and thought differently from other people. My interests in life and my gender expression were clearly different from other girls, and I later came to understand that my orientation was also. I did not fit in with the stereotypes that people held for how girls were supposed to look, act, and be. My otherness was a target. I spent years dealing with bullying from other students. That is why doing well in school became a refuge for me. My skills, knowledge, and dispositions aligned perfectly with the educational expectations laid before me. No matter how hard things were for me socially, being an excellent student was something that I could feel good about. I knew that no one could take that away from me. I was a high achiever, and everybody knew it.

When I was 16, my world suddenly got a whole lot bigger when I moved with my family to Grand Rapids. My experience of transferring to an urban public high school, one in which I was a racial minority for the first time in my life, helped me understand just how fortunate I had been to learn in an education system that suited me so well. I quickly became a standout student, with teachers and staff recognizing my talents as soon as I arrived. I represented the ideal student to the educators at my school: engaged, deferential, and hard-working. I was a model of the myth of meritocracy (Harris, 1993; Bonilla-Silva, 2009), fitting closely to white, middle-class norms and values that shape notions of what it means to be a successful, laudable student. School was

still socially difficult, but I never doubted that I had a bright future ahead of me. The encouragement I received from faculty and staff, along with many awards and accolades I received from the school, confirmed to me that others expected my future success as well. I was consistently held up by teachers and administrators as a stellar student, and I had a reputation among my fellow students for being a straight-A student as well.

High school in Grand Rapids was also a major turning point in my understanding of my own racial identity. Although my whiteness was still difficult to see in terms of my close fit with the school (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, DiAngelo, 2011), the new experience in standing out racially was important for me. It was an opportunity for me to finally think about myself as a racialized person, including myself in relation to other people. As a white person who grew up surrounded almost exclusively by white people, my whiteness had been invisible to me. My new school changed that for me.

At the same time, my understanding of educational stratification was bounded by my experience and the dominant discourses used to explain differing levels of educational attainment. Tracking was heavy at my school, and as a white person, this seemed natural and reasonable to me. There was a much lower proportion of students of color in my advanced classes as compared to the proportion of students of color in the general student body. However, I doubt that I noticed this fact much. It just seemed logical to me that there be classes available at all different skill levels. My own academic successes obscured for me how the academic system further marginalized so many of my fellow students. I did not yet understand the highly normative and destructive nature of tracking programs (Venzant Chambers, 2000) or how it is just one of the many ways that whiteness is both normalized and made invisable within schools (Delgado & Stefancic 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

High school did set me on a path toward thinking about differences in achievement, though. I was a young person who cared about the world and the people in it. I saw the hardships that many other students faced. However, I recognize now that my perspective was heavily influenced by both a deficit mindset and a belief that schools were inherently good institutions that students and families needed help accessing (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Calabrese Barton et al., 2004). My deficit thinking about marginalized people continued through my undergraduate career, even though I learned a great deal about the historical inequities that had deeply affected people of color for centuries. I understood contemporary disparities in resources and the ways in which so many students are shut out of the education system, but I thought that the solution was to give people the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to align with the school system. In essence, I thought that I should help them be more like me. My ignorance fell in line with longstanding problematic notions about the role of education in social uplift. Since the beginning of education in the US, people of color have been told that they will be accepted by mainstream society if they finally assimilate into the norms, values, and practices of white people. Kendi (2016) terms this philosophy about advancement *uplift suasion.* However, history has shown that even these moves to gain social acceptability have not been enough for people of color to achieve the equality that they deserve. Moreover, I understand now that these impossible societal standards also perpetuate the intense marginalization of the norms and values of people of color, including their own practices of learning and educating.

Overcoming my problematic beliefs has taken me years of graduate education and self work. A major part of my journey toward greater understanding was teaching adult students in Washington, DC and learning directly from people of color about the many challenges they had faced as students in the US educational system. And directly relevant to my research, I also

learned about the struggles of my students who were also parents as they worked to support their children in the same inequitable system that they had experienced themselves. However, even my experiences with my students were shaped by my original intents of white saviorism (Picower, 2012), believing that my notions about education were the correct ones and that my students needed me in order to finally achieve educational success. A few years later, even my master's program reinforced many of these highly problematic, deficit-minded ideas.

Thankfully, my doctoral program has challenged me to finally reevaluate this damaging mindset and consider the implications of that thinking. For the first time in my life, I am coming to understand the violence that the US education system does to people of color and other marginalized groups. Throughout my process of learning and growth, countless marginalized people and allies in my life have shown me an abundance of patience, grace, and generosity in guiding me toward a fuller and more nuanced understanding of society and my place in it. In particular, this growth has illuminated for me the many forces of oppression operating within society and how the decisions of people in power perpetuate inequities. I still have much more work to do in learning about these issues and my positionality within them.

While students and families can in fact use support from educational systems, I now believe firmly that those systems and the people in them need to change even more. Educators need help learning to connect with students and families, and the system as a whole must begin to center the values, assets, needs, and desires of all of the families they serve. As a researcher, I am pushing myself to recognize my place in my work but still always center my commitment to equity and social justice for everyone touched by the educational system.

## A Note on Terms

Before moving forward, I offer definitions for some of the most important terms that I use throughout this work. These concepts are integral to understanding this complex policy environment. While each of these terms carry several meanings, the following descriptions are intended to detail how I will use them throughout this paper and my project as a whole. I will unpack these terms in greater detail in my complete dissertation, but these simplified definitions provide a starting point for understanding key ideas that are essential components of these studies. Further, the definition of these terms bolsters the congruence of this set of studies, as these terms drive the topics I am interested in examining, the questions I ask, the lens I use to conceptualize this context, and the methodology I will employ to pursue this work.

### Stakeholder Terms

The work of supporting the education and schooling of children requires the coordinated efforts of countless individuals. Throughout this dissertation, I repeatedly refer to several stakeholder groups, including parents, family, educators, and policymakers. Although I tend to discuss these stakeholders within discreet identities, I recognize that many individuals hold multiple identities and support students through multiple roles.

While schools, policies, and literature sometimes bind the term *parent* within legal definitions, many important stakeholders employ a much broader definition, and rightly so (Epstein, 2010; Warren et al., 2009). Many individuals serve in essential parenting roles in the lives of children. For my purposes, I define parents as adults who have a role of integral, primary support for the health, safety, and wellbeing of children. This definition extends beyond the legal definition of parents and guardians to include other family members and other adults who have primary responsibility for the wellbeing of children. In the context of families with limited

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financial and logistical resources, such individuals can have very important bearing upon the work of schools and student wellbeing. Much like my definition for parent, I define *family* broadly and use it to mean people with close personal ties to students whether or not they are related to students by law or lineage. Family can include an even broader social network and include people of all ages.

The roles of professionals have important impacts on student support systems as well. When I use the term *educator*, I generally refer to educational professionals and support staff who have relationships with students, parents, and families. Educators include those focused on academics and administration such as teachers, paraprofessionals, academic coaches, principals, district superintendents, and other administrative staff. However, I also broaden my definition to include those in important support positions, including office staff; custodial and maintenance staff; security workers; cafeteria and playground staff; athletic coaches; childcare workers; and extracurricular program leaders. While my research usually focuses on teachers and school and district administrators, I argue that personnel in all of these roles provide essential support for the education of students.

*Policymakers* can also hold many roles and have influence at many levels. In this set of studies, I focus on policymakers at the district and state levels. This includes school board members, superintendents, district staff, state school board members, state superintendents, the Michigan Department of Education, and state legislators. I also pay some attention to school policymakers who set parental engagement policy, and I sometimes reference federal policymakers in the context of Title I. In general, the stakeholders that I refer to are professionals who set policy as part of their professional duties. However, others can also have important roles in creating policy, including teachers, school and district staff, and parents.

**Policy & Practice Terms**

In legal and policy documents, *parental involvement* is commonly used to describe activities that parents pursue in support of their children's schooling. Much of my research focuses on these documents and their implementation in schools, so at times I use this term instead of parental engagement. However, use of the term is declining in use as policy documents come up for reauthorization or revision. In contrast, the term *parental engagement* has grown in popularity among educators in recent years because it suggests that schools must work to reach out to parents and actively bring them into educational endeavors (Warren et al., 2009). The most recent authorization of Title I made the transition toward parental engagement. It should be noted, however, that many stakeholders commonly interchange engagement and involvement terms for each other. In practice, stakeholders do not always hold meaningful conceptual distinctions between the two. It is worth noting that the latest reauthorization of ESEA changed parental involvement to parent and family engagement.

One of most holistic and comprehensive approaches to relationships among adults who support students is *school/family/community partnerships* This term was coined by Epstein (1995) to describe in-depth, deeply committed relationships that support the educational lives of children. These concepts are reciprocal in nature, emphasizing communication and understanding in support of multiple facets of students' lives. This framework has garnered increasing popularity among educators over the last twenty-five years. This model is also sometimes referred to in the field and in my work as *authentic partnerships* (Auerbach, 2011; Sanders & Harvey, 2002).

**Social Geography Terms**

     *Urban* education and the relationship between urban districts and their *suburban* counterparts are at the heart of this research. Within state policy itself, these terms are underdefined and underconceptualized. The state of Michigan makes some distinctions between urban and rural school districts based solely on student population. However, defining urban and suburban schools necessitates an embrace of complexity, not a retreat to a reductionist approach that relies almost solely on statistics.

     One important consideration in defining urban and suburban concepts is the persistent unidimensional binary between the two. As Kruse & Segrue (2006) argue, metropolitan regions have become increasingly interconnected since World War II. Many metropolitan areas feature several important regional ties, such as transportation, economic interdependence, and resource sharing. In the context of schooling, regional organizations like intermediate school districts often provide services to urban, rural, and suburban districts alike. To further complicate this binary, stereotypical factors that play into conventional definitions (such as racial and economic identities) are constantly shifting in urban and suburban settings through phenomena such as gentrification (Posey-Maddox, 2014).

     However, important districts remain, and many critical scholars highlight the social construction of conceptualizations of school geography. That is, concepts like urban and suburban are co-developed by people, and these concepts are not limited to mere demographics or other statistics. Warren & Venzant Chambers (2020) provide us with a blueprint for a deeper conceptualization of both urban and suburban environments, with a particular emphasis on a social foundations approach. They urge researchers to consider both historical and contemporary context, including how the choices of individuals shape physical and social environments. Citing

Buendia (2010), they also argue for understandings of urban and suburban to draw on factors of space and place. In talking about Buendia's work, they note:

> He advocated for a much more comprehensive epistemological and
> ontological stance that, for example, acknowledges the implications of
> history and human agency for determining how both "urban" space (e.g.,
> dynamic and flexible cultural practices, social relations to economic
> power, opportunity, and material resources) and place (e.g., concrete,
> fixed, situation physical locations[s] and structures) are mutually
> constituted as human subjects move in and between them (p. 370).

This kind of attention to complexity and context in considering geographical factors is instrumental to my research. For instance, I consider geographically driven dynamics such as the implications of geographical shifts in parent and student populations; how well schools serve historically marginalized parents; the shifting meanings of political geographical boundaries; and the diversion of resources from urban schools and into suburban ones. Throughout this research, I continuously consider how policy and geography impact each other.

**Social Justice Terms**

*Access* is an undertheorized concept in educational policy studies. While the concept of access has been taken up in the field of higher education, there has been less work directly theorizing access in K-12 and particularly K-12 policy work. Even when scholars engage with access issues, it seems that such work tends to proceed without explicit definitions or conceptualizations of exactly what access can mean. However, disability studies provides an extensive body of literature regarding notions of access and differing approaches and definitions. For instance, scholars who examine disability access issues in library studies note that

mainstream definitions of access tend to emphasize mainstream and even positivist notions of access. Instead, these authors urge a move toward what they call *collective access*. This framing emphasizes individual experience, solidarity, and interdependence (Kumbier & Starkey, 2016; Mingus, 2010a; Mingus, 2010b). In the context of this work, I consider how policy and policies contexts provide--or restrict--access to the opportunities outlined in policy. I also examine how access may impact individuals but also groups and explore the ways that policy generally promotes individual over collective, holistic interests. For these reasons, collective access notions are a good fit for my work.

*Equity* is another foundational concept in my work. Equity is a subjective concept and a matter of much debate within the legal, policy, and scholarship history of education (Stone, 2002). In this work, I leverage a social justice-focused definition offered by Bensimon et al. (2016): "Equity means accounting for differences in individual attributes and experiences for the purposes of achieving equal outcomes." Leaning on equal opportunity is not enough in a drive toward equity. Policymakers must center goals of equal outcomes in education and consider holistically the policy context and the life circumstances of the students and families that policies are intended to serve. This definition specifically addresses how organizations can operationalize equity, taking it up in intentional and meaningful ways. In using this term in both my conceptualizations and analysis, I argue that equity can and should be at the center of educational policymaking and policy implementation.

Throughout this research, I use the term *marginalized* to describe identity groups (and specifically parents) who are the targets of systems of oppression within society. In these three research projects, the primary marginalized groups that study are people of color, people living in poverty, people with disabilities, English language learners, and immigrants to the U.S. While

many social identities are marginalized in U.S. society, I focus on this list because those are the identities that are explicitly named in the policy documents that I examine. Many members of marginalized groups are also members of others, and their intersectionality identity means that they bear the brunt of overlapping, compounding systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1990).

Within the context of this dissertation, my definition of *power* is deeply rooted in my critical conceptual approach to interrogating policy. CPA commonly conceptualizes power as social advantage that can be instrumentalized as a tool of oppression. In their theorizing of educational policy as a practice of power, Levinson et al. (2009) describe policy as "the production of normative discourse for the reproduction of inequality, hegemony, and subordinated political subjects" (p. 774). In line with the authors' approach, my work "attempts to elucidate the way that policy typically serves to reproduce existing structures of domination and inequality (p. 769)."

APPENDIX

# APPENDIX A

**Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies: A Conceptual Framework**

Appendix A exhibits a table to aid understanding of my conceptual framework. The table details the conceptual connections running throughout these studies between the five critical concerns (left column) and the most prominent parental engagement dynamics that are present in the literature (center column). I use this format to help conceptualize each of my three papers, and I have included a preliminary example of how each critical concern is manifest in my data (right column).

Table 4: *Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies: A Conceptual Framework*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| **1. Concern regarding the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality** | • Proponents claim policies will support equity<br>• On the whole, policies actually tend to worsen inequities<br>• Neoconservative & neoliberal ideology coupled with rational choice theory | Paper 1<br>• Stated goals of policies are to improve access and inclusion, but implementation of engagement policy still follows historical norms<br>Paper 2<br>• Despite equity rhetoric, many parents may not have access to the policy<br>Paper 3<br>• National coverage of Michigan's choice environment under the Devos regime |
| **2. Concern regarding the policy, its roots, and its development (context)** | • Historical and contemporary context of oppression in schools and educational policy<br>• Hegemonic norms around parental engagement activities<br>• Problematic policy language | Paper 1<br>• Title I says parents should be involved in policymaking but gives few parameters to protect parent rights to do so<br>Paper 2<br>• Despite supposed equity focus, policies do not contain equity-centered language<br>Paper 3<br>• Policymakers had little understanding of the consequences of policy for districts and parents |
| **3. Concern with the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge as well as the creation of policy "winners" and "losers"** | • Centering of the school<br>• Gatekeeping functions within schools and districts<br>• Logistical, social, and emotional barriers<br>• Competitive forces hurt parents in districts that cannot compete | Paper 1<br>• Urban schools lose massive financial resources: "death spirals"<br>Paper 2<br>• Suburban schools get to try to fill to capacity<br>Paper 3<br>• Distribution of information only in English |
| **4. Concern regarding stratification and the broader effect a given policy has on relationships of inequality and privilege** | • Policy tends to benefit already-advantaged parents<br>• Reproduction and potential worsening of inequalities and inequities through policy<br>• Practices of marginalized parents discounted<br>• Framing marginalized parents as uncaring and deficient | Paper 1<br>• Schools largely dictate how parents may be engaged<br>Paper 2<br>• Distribution of information only in English limits access<br>Paper 3<br>• Urban schools lose massive financial resources: "death spirals" |
| **5. Concern regarding the nature of resistance to or engagement in policy by members of non-dominant groups** | • Marginalized parents support children in vital ways<br>• Parents empowered by knowing their rights<br>• Challenging notions of what achievement and success mean | Paper 1<br>• Parents "opting out" of interactions with schools<br>Paper 2<br>• Urban parents resisting negative impacts of choice like school closure<br>Paper 3<br>• Urban parents choosing urban schools |

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**PAPER I: EXAMINING DISTRICT PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT POLICIES
THROUGH CRITICAL POLICY ANALYSIS: A COMPARISON OF URBAN AND
SUBURBAN DISTRICTS IN MICHIGAN**

**Introduction, Motivation, & Research Questions**

The promotion of parental engagement in schools is an institutional standard of practice
(Lareau, 2000), and this promotion is formally codified in policies at every level of educational
jurisdiction. The most far-reaching of these policies is Section 1116[2] of Title I of the Every
Student Succeeds Act of 2015, which lays out mandates and guides for parental engagement
policies and practices at the state, district, and school levels (Elementary and Secondary
Education Act of 1965, 2015). Over 25 million students are served by the program annually
(Snyder et al., 2019). Although qualifications for funding vary from state to state based on
federal formulas, the intent of Title I is to provide supplemental educational funding for students
living in poverty. However, the Title I statute requires that institutions receiving funds must
focus their efforts on a much broader range of parent, family, and student identities. In particular,
Section 1116 (2015), entitled "Parent and Family Engagement," states that local educational
agencies must identify and address "barriers to greater participation by parents in activities
authorized by this section (with particular attention to parents who are economically
disadvantaged, are disabled, have limited English proficiency, have limited literacy, or are of any
racial or ethnic minority background)" (p. 2).

Although parental engagement policies exist at every level of the US education system,
little research has been done on parental engagement policy and policy documents themselves.
Under Section 1116 of Title I, districts and schools are required to develop and distribute

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[2] This section was previously numbered 1118 under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Some district and school
policy documents still retain this number designation.

parental engagement plans (PE Plans). Further, these policies are to be jointly developed with parents from the district (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, 2015). Further, Michigan's Public Act 107 of 2004 requires that school boards develop, disseminate, and implement parental engagement policies. This study is motivated by the desire to understand more about both the form and content of these policy documents. Additionally, I examine district school board policies that govern parental engagement activities to consider how they relate to and differ from PE Plans. I situate these two types of policies within the broader parental engagement policy context, specifically exploring challenges to access and equity for marginalized parents.

Despite the widespread nature of parental engagement policies and their stated intents to assist historically marginalized parents, many scholars assert that policies fall short of those stated equity goals (Crozier, 2001; Denessen et al., 2007; Kim, 2006; Webster, 2004). Others caution that vague and colormute policy language can actually perpetuate systemic inequalities and inequities in schools (Pollock, 2008). Further, this problematic policy language has major implications for implementation, particularly when it does not address the many and diverse assets, values, needs, and desires of families living in poverty and families of color (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Calabrese Barton et al., 2004; Yasso, 2005). Schools are already institutions that were built to serve the interests of white, middle-class students and families (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lareau, 2000; Leonardo, 2013; Posey-Maddox, 2014). Therefore, policies that do not directly and explicitly tackle issues of racial and class inequality and involve marginalized parents in policy development work are likely to continue to benefit the interests of whiteness, white people, and people with economic advantages.

In order to investigate the nature of these district policy documents and their potential impacts on practice, I have been guided by three related research questions:

1. What is the form and content of district-level parental engagement policies?

2. How do the policies of urban districts compare and contrast with policies from suburban districts?

3. What power dynamics are revealed by the form, content, and accessibility of these policies?

As I will describe further, these research questions were generated through an iterative process, drawing from both the literature, my data, and my past research experiences working with these topics. Leveraging critical policy analysis (CPA) and critical parental engagement studies literature, I apply a unique conceptual lens to theorizing and investigating these research questions. I call this conceptual framework *critical parental engagement policy studies.* My methodological approach is critical document analysis, rooted in the conventions of qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009) but specifically applying a critical epistemological and conceptual lens. My analysis process uses deductive-dominant coding (Armat et al., 2018), with my conceptual framework directly guiding my analysis. In this regard, my conceptual framework largely acts as my analytical framework as well. However, the iterative nature of my deductive-dominant approach also left ample room for the generation of original, unanticipated themes.

This study is related to a whole host of issues involving parental engagement policy, so it is important to define the scope of this work. This inquiry investigates parental engagement policy documents. I situate these documents within their contexts, investigating several factors that may influence the design and implementation of them. However, this study does not

investigate the real-world processes and implementation of these policies within their districts. Any issues of the intentions of policymakers, the fidelity with which educators implement policy, or how stakeholders build relationships with each other are outside the scope of this work. As such, I do not make claims about the policy process beyond the document data in my sample. Instead, I limit my investigation and claims to the language of documents and the broader social context, and I support those claims with literature. Taken together, this study yields important findings regarding the nature of district parental engagement policies and how those policies present challenges to access and equity for marginalized parents.

## Conceptual Framework: Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies

The parental engagement policy documents I examine in this study represent a wealth of data about how power dynamics may be at work in the development, communication, and implementation of parental engagement policy. Data reveal a multitude of themes, including access to policy documents; patterns in the language used to describe targeted groups of parents; and policy differences between districts with large numbers of Title I students and those with low numbers. Although parental engagement policies exist with the explicit purpose of increasing opportunities for historically disadvantaged groups, these policies actually carry the possibility of worsening inequities. CPA offers avenues to deeply interrogate the fullness of these policy contexts, including the values and interests expressed in documents.

As the field of policy research has grown, an increasing number of scholars have taken up a critical conceptual lens. CPA offers a dynamic and sophisticated means to investigate a broad range of policy issues and contexts (Diem et al., 2014; Hyatt, 2013; Lingard, 2009; Trujillo, 2014). Traditional policy analysis is commonly rooted in positivism; a belief in policy as a discreet, step-by-step process; and a belief that policy actors are driven by clear and concrete

motivations (Diem et al., 2014). In contrast, CPA views educational policy as a complex, messy process that is full of competing interests and tensions. According to Diem & Young, (2015), CPA enables "a deeper inquiry into the roots of educational policy work, the contextual nuances and complexities of the policy process, and the unintended and often overlooked consequences of policy solutions" (p. 841).

Specifically, I draw on Diem & Young's (2015) "5 Critical Concerns" of CPA. These ideas help critical policy scholars break down and analyze specific aspects of policy and consider their potential implications for the development, implementation, and impacts of policy. Within the context of this study, I essentially take up these critical concerns as tenets of CPA. I couple this CPA approach with the critical parental engagement literature to more deeply examine the interactions between parents and educational policy. The table below shows these relationships between CPA's critical concerns and parental engagement dynamics.

Figure 2: *Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies: A Conceptual Framework*



Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies:
A Conceptual Framework

5 CRITICAL CONCERNS

| Rhetoric v Reality | Policy Context | Winners & Losers | Stratification | Resistance to Oppression |

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT DYNAMICS

| *Proponents claim policies will support equity  *On the whole, policies actually tend to worsen inequities | *Oppression in schools and educational policy  *Hegemonic norms around parental engagement activities  *Problematic policy language | *Centering of the school  *Gatekeeping functions  *Barriers to access | *Policy benefits already-advantaged parents  *Reproduction of inequities  *Practices of marginalized parents discounted  *Deficit framing | *Parents empowered by knowing rights  *Parents support children in own ways  *Challenging notions success  *Tradition of parent activism |

## Statement of Positionality & Ethical Commitments

All research is influenced by the positionality of researchers involved, and critical qualitative inquiry exhibits a particular commitment to exploring and communicating the relationships between researcher positionality and research (Denzin, 2017). As does any researcher, I bring my own personal experiences, identities, perspectives, biases, and goals to my research. This reflexivity is important even in the context of a project like this one, where I do not work with participants or have a role in the generation of data. My perspective still influences all aspects of my research, including the research questions I ask, the methods I use to investigate them, and the ways I interpret my findings. Given that I study complex and sensitive issues around identity, power, and privilege, I have a responsibility to attend to my personal relationship with these issues.

My reflection on how my positionality impacts this study is aided by what scholars often call the insider/outsider dynamic (Obasi, 2014). While some issues of my project make me an insider, other aspects are distant from my own identity and experiences, making me an outsider. This project investigates how district parental engagement policies present challenges for access and equity for marginalized parents. Some aspects of my identity make me an insider to these issues, including my childhood in a working-class household that struggled with economic insecurity.

At the same time, my parents were able to engage with schools in ways that largely aligned with expectations of educators and the hegemonic norms about relationships between parents and schooling. That close alignment between my family's identity and the educational system is connected to many factors. I am a white scholar who was born in the U.S. and learned English as my first language. I have typical learning abilities and was able to move through my

schooling with relative ease. In short, the U.S. educational system was set to support students like me (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). My privilege imparts upon me a responsibility to work to dismantle the oppressive forces that gave me my privilege in the first place. It is for these reasons that I take up this work, to expose the many inadequacies of parental engagement policies and the ways that policies all too often stand to make inequities even worse for marginalized parents and their children.

Some other aspects of my identity lie outside some of the stakeholder identities that are central to this study. I am a person who does not have children, and I am not an educator in a K-12 school setting. While I care deeply about how policies impact the relationships between parents and educators, I cannot personally relate to being a part of those relationships. I do not know the personal challenges of parenting and supporting my child's education, and I have not experienced the challenges of K-12 classroom teaching and working to build relationships with the parents of my students. Additionally, I am not an educational policymaker. I have not experienced the many challenges faced by policymakers, like balancing many stakeholder interests, promoting a political agenda, and drafting policies that practitioners can implement with success. Because I cannot personally relate to these experiences, I do my best to avoid any claims about the intentions or motivations of stakeholders involved in this work. Instead, I limit my claims to those that are supported by my data and the existing literature.

I come to this work with several motivations that are driven by my identity, experiences, and ethical priorities. I center my work on issues of oppression within educational policy in Michigan, my home state. I have a deep desire to improve educational opportunities for all students in Michigan, but my earliest connections with the research I present here involve my experiences as an adult education specialist in Washington, D.C. Those experiences included

teaching GED preparation classes and advising adult students who wished to transition into postsecondary education and training. Many of my students were parents who were working hard to provide for their children's wellbeing through their own continuing education. My work with my students illuminated for me the many ways that educational systems shut marginalized parents out, perpetuating generations of inequities. Years later, I have used this research to provide a better understanding of one important aspect of that structural oppression by investigating challenges to access and equity in parental engagement policy documents.

## Review of the Literature

In order to support the investigation of these research questions, this paper is informed by two primary bodies of literature: the general parental engagement literature and literature that specifically investigates parental engagement policy. As mentioned above, there is a large base of literature on the general topic of parental engagement. However, the subtopic that is most pertinent to this study focuses on challenges to access and equity in parental engagement opportunities.

Important themes and perspectives also emerge from the literature that directly addresses parental engagement policy. This is a very small body of literature. Therefore, when doing my search for pertinent peer-reviewed articles, I opted to include some international articles in my examination. Because context is very important when considering the power dynamics and implications at play in any given policy environment, it is important to not overgeneralize. However, certain dynamics hold true across policy contexts.

**General Critique of Notions of Parental Engagement**

    **Enduring legacy of whiteness and racism.**

    One of the most foundational texts on the issue of racial inequality in schools is Ladson-Billings & Tate's (1995) "Toward a Critical Race Theory in Education." In this piece, the authors detail many of the countless ways in which the US educational system was designed by white people, for white people. As such, students and families of color are at an inherent disadvantage in trying to access services from schools. Moreover, services and resources are disproportionately allocated to more advantaged families. Through this lens, we see the ways in which engaging with schools is more difficult for families of color because the institutional norms and values of schools are different from those of communities of color. The inherently racist nature of the US school system advances expectations for engagement that align most directly with the practices of white families and codifies these norms within educational policy.

    Another foundational piece is Calabrese Barton et al.'s (2004) "Ecologies of Parental Engagement in Urban Education." The authors acknowledge the deeply problematic nature of the history of education that has shut out parents living in poverty and parents of color and the contemporary realities that parents must still contend with. Importantly, the authors also complicate this discussion about the normativity around parental engagement practices to parents' understanding of the *hows* and *whys* of engagement. As part of their ecology model, they urge us to consider the different ways in which parents of color may conceptualize their engagement. Calabrese Barton et al. designed this model in order to help educators better understand where parents are coming from and the resounding ways in which the inequities of the educational system drive deficit narratives about marginalized parents. As will be described further in this paper, the literature indicates that the racist underpinnings of schools' current

engagement policies and practices have serious implications for the equity goals that schools are working toward.

**Addressing barriers to engagement.**

Over 25 years ago, Epstein (1995) began researching what she felt to be the most impactful barriers that marginalized face in their engagement and developed a framework for educators to focus on eliminating these barriers. In her piece "School/Family/Community Partnerships: Caring for the Children We Share," Epstein enumerates many of these barriers. She further structures the work of schools into areas that need close attention, including parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decisionmaking, and collaborating with community. In particular, she outlines many of the resource constraints that parents of color face as they take on many work and family responsibilities. She also urges that schools must make open and accessible communication a priority for all families, especially those in need of translation services. This piece also lays-out structures for schools to put in place that will directly involve parents in every facet of the school through the creation and implementation of action teams. These committees are dedicated to the long-term work that is required to build partnerships with all stakeholders in order to support student learning. Encouraging examples do exist of authentic partnerships yielding positive returns for student success and community building (Auerbach, 2011; Sanders & Harvey, 2002).

The Epstein Model has been taken up by educational agencies the world over, from local school districts to UNESCO. However, some authors argue that this model does not go far enough to give deep-seeded and sustained power to marginalized parents and therefore actually stands to perpetuate inequities in schools. For instance, Bower & Griffin (2011) study the implementation of the Epstein Framework at an elementary school with a high population of

students of color and students living in poverty. They find that the success of implementation can be highly context-dependent and that traditional conceptualizations of parental engagement still bear strong influence on the work of schools. Importantly, the authors find that many parents of color have differing beliefs about the roles of schools. Some feel that academics are the purview of schools and the development of important learning experiences like cultural development are the domain of parents. Therefore, there may be a fundamental disconnect among stakeholders about the purposes of schooling and partnerships. Bower & Griffin argue that as long as this sort of disconnect exists, schools will continue to fall short in their responsibilities to include parents in educational endeavors in meaningful ways.

**Mismatch between schools & marginalized parents.**

In a closely related vein, some authors argue that white, middle-class parents are better positioned to advocate for their students, often at the expense of parents and students of color. In their book *The American Dream and the Public Schools,* Hochschild & Scovronick (2004) argue that US schools offer a particular set of engagement opportunities to parents, and those opportunities are aligned most closely with white, middle-class parenting practices. Parents with skills and dispositions that meet schools' expectations are better able to advocate for their children's interests, with parents living in poverty and parents of color being disadvantaged within a meritocratic system.

Denessen et al. (2007) describe the context of The Netherlands in order to bring to light tensions of schools' traditional standards of practice and families who may have cultural differences. They find that different educators have differing views regarding the balance between maintaining traditional expectations for parents and incorporating meaningful elements of parents' culture into educational endeavors. However, they also find that important school

finance and other resource pressures come to bear in these decisions. Because it is typically less expensive and labor-intensive to abide by traditional practices, schools much more commonly opt for tradition over striving for greater inclusion and diversity of practices.

In *When Middle Class Parents Choose Urban Schools,* Posey-Maddox (2014) describes an even more timely dynamic of how shifting housing patterns in urban contexts are impacting public schooling. She examines the engagement choices of white, middle-class parents, spanning everything from the drawing of catchment zones to membership in organizations such as the PTA. She finds that more advantaged parents have many resources to bring to bear upon important decisions within schools, while the interests, voices, perspectives of parents of color and parents living in poverty are valued less. As discussed above, white, middle-class parents are typically more closely aligned with the culture of schools, and even urban schools. As a result, the increasing number of white, middle-class families in schools actually perpetuates inequities and can even create new ones. Without careful policy and practice to drive equitable parental engagement opportunities for marginalized parents, the potential benefits of housing and educational desegregation can easily be diminished by these growing forces of gentrification.

Other scholars take a social capital theoretical approach to understanding the mismatch between schools and marginalized parents. Lareau & Horvat (1999) unpack these ideas in their examination of differential abilities of parents to interact with schools in expected ways. They compare the cases of two sets of parents of color, one with a middle-class background and another working-class. They find that the middle-class family was better able to communicate their wishes for their child to educators within the school in a manner that was considered acceptable to those educators. In contrast, the working-class family's interactions were much more confrontational and ultimately less successful as this family attempted to advocate for their

child. Here, the implication is that there are social forces beyond the control of these families that dictate which behaviors are considered ideal from parents and which are considered problematic. Those conventions are largely based on white, middle-class norms and values. While some parents have the social capital to behave in a way that aligns with these expectations, others do not and are therefore excluded in highly impactful, inequitable ways.

Howard & Reynolds (2008) also examine middle-class Black families, but they find that those families are marginalized in many ways regardless of class. Although some Black families do have the ability today to move into more affluent school districts, the authors provide evidence that Black families possess less cultural capital than their white peers. Parents who participated in the study reported that they found it necessary to actively challenge the norms of the school, largely because their children received disproportionately negative treatment in areas such as advanced educational opportunities and discipline. These disparities can lead to differential academic performance, so parents of color were forced to operate strategically within these school settings. They felt that their practices were not well understood and appreciated by educators, so the authors hope that their research will contribute to educator knowledge about the importance of truly inclusive school-family partnerships.

**Pushback on Notions of the Engagement Gap**

Although the many scholars discussed above make arguments about the existence of the parental engagement gap and largely frame their arguments in terms of injustices done to students of color, other scholars argue that the very notion of this gap brings up many racial justice concerns. Some of these pieces focus on school expectations, while others focus on the many ways in which parents are involved that lie outside the legitimated set of traditional engagement practices. For instance, Lareau (2000) discusses expectations of teachers for

engagement practices. She finds that teachers typically desire supportive behaviors from parents, including volunteering, attendance at parent-teacher conferences, deference to teachers' professional judgement, pleasant interactions, and symbolic demonstrations of support. These expectations stand in opposition to many statements that teachers made to her during this study, particularly in how teachers generally stated that they desired authentic partnerships with parents. In reality, this study suggests that teachers hope for relationships on their own terms, not based on the desires of parents. Auerbach (2009) draws similar conclusions.

Baquedano-López et al. (2013) also discuss normative conceptualizations of parental engagement. Firstly, the authors discuss the tremendous extent to which the traditional conceptualization of parental engagement centers the school and frames schools as inherently good institutions. The educational endeavor is meant to bring parents into the school's work, and parents are expected to align their behaviors with schools. However, schools are not asked for the same level of shift in terms of identity and attempting to align with the assets, values, needs, and desires of families. Much like Lareau's (2000) finding mentioned above, educators feel that the agenda of schools should define how parents participate in support of education, not the other way around.

Baquedano-López et al. (2013) also point out the problematic nature of measurement, including how both student success and parental engagement are measured. The hyper emphasis on measurement confines definitions to items that can be easily measured and largely ignores practices that cannot. Moreover, the measurable engagement practices tend to be ones that are very closely aligned with white, middle-class norms and values, which further marginalizes the practices of parents of color and parents living in poverty. An equally important aspect of narrow measurement is the fact that these highly normed metrics skew perceptions of the parental

engagement gap. These metrics are disproportionately representative of white parents but not

parents of color, and other practices that are important to parents of color are not taken into

account. For instance, the authors discuss how parenting practices such as racial identity

development and community membership are difficult to measure but are intensely impactful

and instrumental educational experiences for children of color. The authors also emphasize that

parents of color have been systematically shut out of the educational system since its inception,

noting the many parallels across the history of the US and the current state of schooling.

Lightfoot (2004) discusses the dire implications of these skewed notions. As discussed

above, deficit notions about parents of color are particularly insidious and threaten to shape

educators' notions about what parents are capable of (Compton-Lilly, 2004). Just as troubling is

the possibility that educators assume that parents "just don't care" about their children's

education, and that is why they do not participate in expected ways. While it is true that

marginalized parents often face many barriers to engagement that their more privileged

counterparts do not, notions that parents are apathetic have damaging, biased implications. If

educators do not come to better understand where parents are coming from, Lightfoot argues,

educational inequities will only continue to persist. Structures need to be instituted that will help

educators learn about the practices of parents of color and hold them in the same regard as the

practices of white parents.

**Parental Engagement Policy Literature**

**Problematic policy language.**

Another important barrier identified by the research is the lack of clarity about the goals

and target populations in schools' parental engagement expansion efforts. According to Pollock

(2008), the language that policymakers and practitioners use around this topic is tremendously

vague and drifts dangerously toward a deficit mindset. Language regarding both students living in poverty and students of color is not specific enough to address their needs, nor is it specific enough to directly identify the many barriers faced by parents in being more involved with the work of schools. We need to speak more precisely, Pollock argues, if we are to most directly target services and resources for the families that need them the most.

Epstein (2005) takes up similar arguments in her discussion of the language used in NCLB. She aptly points out that the intent of this policy was to help students and families that have historically been disadvantaged within the educational system. However, the letter of this law does not always stack up against these important and lofty aims. If we are to help marginalized parents become more involved, she urges, the language of policies must be more explicit in identifying the many barriers that these families face and more explicitly discuss the rights of parents and the responsibilities of schools to fulfill those rights. Without a closer alignment between the language and aims of these sorts of policies, the goals of expanding parental engagement opportunities for all families will go unmet.

Adding to these important arguments, Crozier (2001) discusses the troubling use of language to describe historically marginalized parents, particularly parents of color. She argues that the typical language that appears in parental engagement policy is laden with narratives of deficit and also ignores the history of racism and white supremacy in education. Parents of color are framed as a problem to be solved, with changing their behavior framed as the solution. She also points out the problematic nature of colorblind language that can be seen in many policy documents. While many policies explicitly state equity goals, Crozier stresses that such goals cannot be met by policies if the thinking behind them does not actively engage with the realities of racism in schools. Policies must actively target meaningful inclusion of parents of color at all

levels of the policy process, including development, implementation, and evaluation of policies. Failure to explicitly engage with issues of race and racism will only continue to perpetuate the inequities that directly harm parents of color and their children.

**Lack of understanding of the status quo.**

Webster (2004) notes similar criticism about the language used in policy but also expands our understanding of the issue to another problem: the field's lack of knowledge about the current state of affairs in parental engagement. He points out that current evaluation measures for programs and policy implementation are wholly inadequate to give us an accurate picture of this work. Arguing that parental engagement is both a civil rights issue and a school reform issue, he urges that an understanding of the status quo is necessary before parental engagement policy is even written. His organizational theory perspective is invaluable here. While schools scramble to try new and different programming to meet their policy obligations, he stresses that evaluation must happen first and then be adopted, along with an ongoing strategy for school improvement and partnership building. When we take this perspective along with other authors' arguments about differences (but not deficiencies) in the way that parents of color engage with the educational system, we recognize that a great deal of important work is likely overlooked by poor and narrow evaluation techniques.

**Parents' knowledge of parental engagement policy.**

Kim (2006) makes arguments about policy language that are quite similar to authors discussed earlier, noting that vague and problematic language only perpetuates inequalities. However, she also emphasizes the need for clear policies on the books and the wide dissemination of these policies to parents and educators alike. Her study finds that parents who are more informed about their rights in terms of engagement (as well as other educational

matters) are more involved and feel more empowered to advocate for their children. Other authors find similar positive outcomes of parent knowledge of policy (Desimone et al., 2000; Fantuzzo et al., 2000; Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993). Thus, even when policies carry all of the problematic characteristics that have already been discussed in this paper, Kim's study suggests that even lackluster policies are better than schools having no policies at all. Despite this evidence of the benefits of policy, my own research (Thelen, 2018) bears preliminary indications that policy documents may be difficult for parents to access. Therefore, parents who wish to become informed about their rights as codified in policy may need to go to some lengths in contacting schools and district offices to acquire these policies. Considering the resource constraints that many parents face, learning about these policies without proactive communication from schools may be particularly burdensome.

**Discussion of the Literature**

Whether authors agree with the concept of a parental engagement gap or not, important similarities exist across the literature. A common theme is a deep concern for the inequalities and inequities that parents of color and their children face everyday. Several instances of deficit narratives emerge from these works, and some even expound on the troubling notion that parents who are not involved in expected and validated ways do not care about their children's education. These insidious ideas about marginalized parents have serious implications for educational policy and practice and must be combatted. Schools have a responsibility to include all parents in their work in equal and fair ways. This means that moving forward, educators must work to build authentic partnerships. An important part of this work is building understanding of the values, assets, needs, and desires of parents of color and parents living in poverty and incorporating those important traits into education in meaningful ways. These authentic

partnerships stand to benefit all students as educators and parents work together toward social and racial justice in the educational system.

## Study Design

As is typical in document analysis methodology (Bowen, 2009), engaging in this study required tapping into multiple literature bases; conceptualizing and collecting a demonstrative collection of district parental engagement policies; systematically reading and analyzing those policies themselves; and interpreting the findings of my analysis. In order to bring in my critical perspective, I used my conceptual framework as the basis for a deductive-dominant analytical approach. As Armat et al. (2018) argue, qualitative coding is rarely purely deductive or inductive in nature. Instead, I draw on an approach that began with the application of my analytical framework as a thematic guide for my coding. I then observed inductive themes that emerged from my continued analysis. I detail below how this iterative process unfolded, but first, I include this diagram that shows the connections among my research questions, data sources, methodology, and trustworthiness strategies in my investigation of district parental engagement policy documents in Michigan.

Table 5: *A Methodology Matrix for Investigating District Parental Engagement Policies*

| What do I need to know? (research questions) | Why do I need to know this? (goals) | What kind of data will answer these questions? | Methodology | Addressing Trustworthiness |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Q1: What is the form and content of district-level parental engagement policies?** | descriptive: understanding the physical nature of the policies and the language used. | collection of district-level parental engagement policies | critical document analysis | positionality; triangulation; public disclosure; audit trail; peer consultation |
| **Q2: How do the policies of urban districts compare and contrast with policies from suburban districts?** | descriptive: looking for meaningful patterns of similarity and difference among policies from different types of districts. | collection of policies from urban and suburban districts | critical document analysis | same |
| **Q3: What power dynamics are revealed by the form, content, and accessibility of these policies?** | critical: examining how policy docs are made available; evaluating the access and equity implications of the policies, including how they might reproduce oppression | collection of policies; district and school websites | critical document analysis | same |

**Conceptualizing & Collecting Policy Document Data**

        The intent of this study is to provide a snapshot of a few parental engagement policy environments in Michigan, not to generalize this research to all districts and metropolitan areas. I focus on pairs of urban and suburban districts within the same metropolitan areas. This urban-suburban approach opens up possibilities for comparisons involving not just geography but also different types of school districts. Although there are several metropolitan areas in the state of Michigan that are available for future investigation, I opted to focus on the Grand Rapids, Lansing, and Detroit Metropolitan areas. These happen to be the largest metropolitan areas in the state, with the urban districts maintaining higher numbers of marginalized parents and students than their suburban counterparts.

Table 6: *Districts under Study*

| Metropolitan Area | District | Urban or Suburban? |
|---|---|---|
| **Lansing Metro Area** | **Lansing** | **Urban** |
| | **East Lansing** | **Suburban** |
| **Detroit Metro Area** | **Detroit** | **Urban** |
| | **Ferndale** | **Suburban** |
| **Grand Rapids Metro Area** | **Grand Rapids** | **Urban** |
| | **East Grand Rapids** | **Suburban** |

Table 7: *Descriptions of Available Policy Documents for Each District*

| District | Board Policy | PE Policy Plan | Notes |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lansing | Neola Template through Neola BoardDocs | No documents available and may not exist | Never heard back from district admins |
| East Lansing | MDE Template | No district plan; schools only | District admins said only schools had plans |
| Detroit | Neola Template through Neola BoardDocs | Memo format | Unclear if PE Plan still holds |
| Ferndale | Neola Template through Neola BoardDocs | No district plan; schools only | Confirmed via email |
| Grand Rapids | MDE Template | No true district plan; schools only | District really only provides the MDE guidance and templates for schools |
| East Grand Rapids | MDE Template | Yes; memo format | |

Title I requires each district receiving Title I funds to jointly develop PE Plans with parents and distribute them widely to parents of students who receive Title I services. After extensive internet research of school district websites, I learned that these policies are exceptionally difficult to find. However, I was able to find school board parental engagement policies for all of the districts in my data with relative ease. This unexpected discovery allows for yet another level of comparison and complexity in this study. These school board policy documents were analyzed through similar means as the PE Plans, but the differences in form and content between these two types of policies provide another rich avenue for analysis.[3]

Collection of Title I plans was mostly accomplished through direct email communication with school district staff and officials. Detroit was the only district with a policy that I was able

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[3] Title I also requires parent-teacher-student compacts and student handbooks. While those types of documents do have some implications for parental engagement policy, I do not investigate those in this study.

to locate without assistance. Although Grand Rapids and East Grand Rapids do have policies

available online, they are located in areas of their websites that I likely would never have thought

to search on my own. Even contacting some of these districts was a challenge. Many did not

have clear avenues of communication with pertinent district staff. Given that I had a difficult

time locating these policies, one must question the ease with which parents could acquire copies

of these documents. They would likely have to contact their school officials directly.

**Connecting Literature to Analysis**

Figure 3: *Parental Engagement Literature Map*
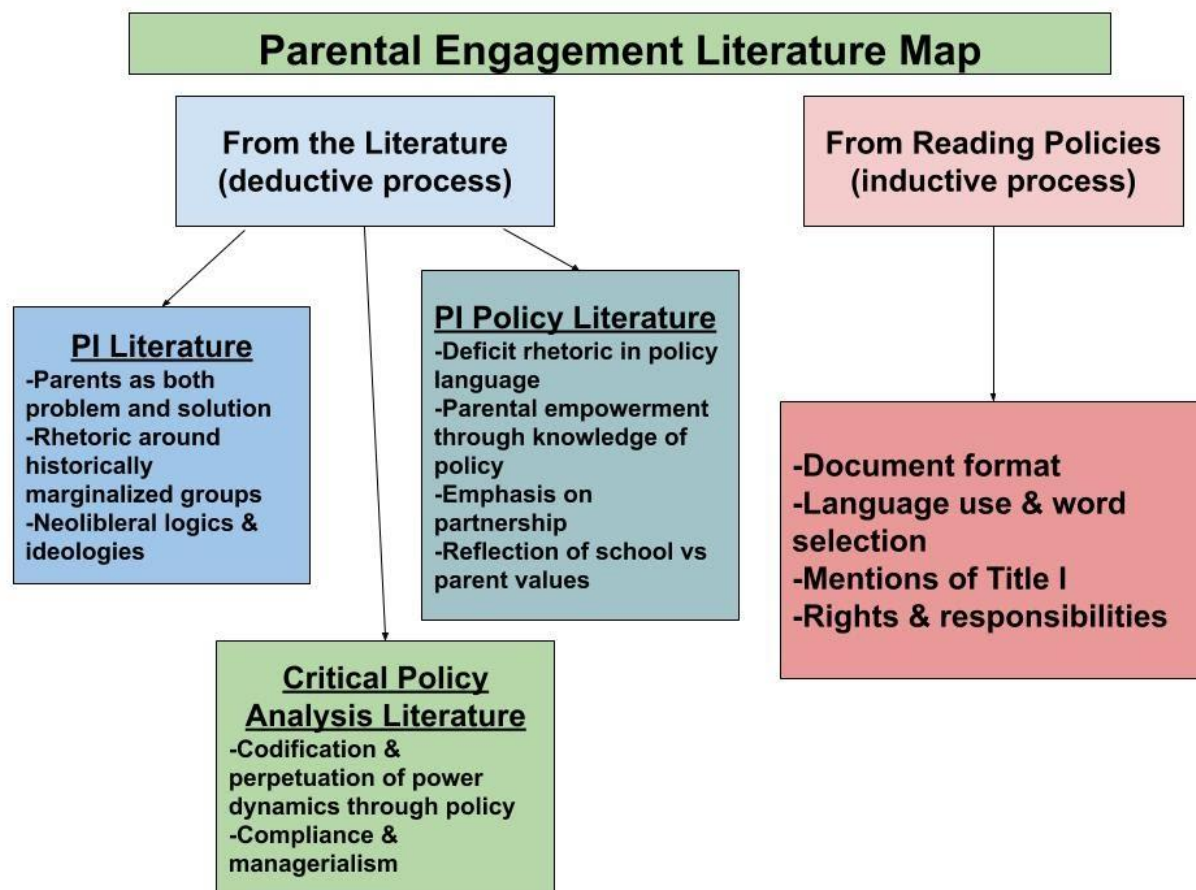


The general parental engagement literature was a major influence on my qualitative

coding approach. While a great deal of the broader body of literature addresses subtopics of

evidence of effectiveness and best practices, my focus is the body of parental engagement

literature that raises questions about power, access, and equity. This subtopic of literature has

drawn my attention to themes such as:

- Framing parents as both a problem and a solution in schools (Posey-Maddox, 2014)

- Common rhetoric about historically marginalized parents (Baquedano-López, 2008)

- Placing the burden of increasing educational equity on the victims of inequity (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013)

- The increased influence of neoliberal logics and ideologies, which frames parents as consumers of educational services, denigrates public institutions, and gives already-advantaged parents still more advantages (Posey-Maddox 2014)

- The persistent dominance of whiteness and white supremacy in schools (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Calabrese Barton et al., 2004; Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995)

- Educators' stated desires for authentic partnerships but exhibited attitudes and behaviors that suggest otherwise (Auerbach, 2009; Lareau, 2000)

- Social exclusion of some parents (Lareau & Horvat, 1999)

Still more important themes emerged from my investigation of the literature that

specifically addresses parental engagement policy:

- Parental engagement policy as both a civil rights issue *and* a school reform strategy (Webster, 2004)

- The targeting of particular social groups, and the lack of specific language in naming them (Crozier, 2001)

- Parents' knowledge of their rights may increase parental engagement and empowerment (Desimone et al., 2000; Fantuzzo et al., 2000; Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993)

- Emphasis on partnership or collaboration (Epstein, 2005)

- Reflection of school versus parent values (Denessen et al., 2007)

- Framing of parent strengths, assets, or deficiencies (Kim, 2006)

To supplement my understanding of the parental engagement and parental engagement policy literature, I also familiarized myself with literature on critical policy analysis (CPA). CPA has served as a basis for my conceptual framework, and these articles have been useful in building my understanding of both the theoretical foundations of CPA and its practical applications. This literature has also helped me conceptualize the power dynamics suggested by policy language and the potential unintended consequences of these policies documents. The following themes emerged from this literature:

- The codification and perpetuation of power dynamics through policy (Lingard, 2009; Diem et al., 2014)

- Policy documents as a mode of hollow compliance (Trujillo, 2014)

- The importance of examining the context of policy (Hyatt, 2013; Diem & Young, 2015)

**Analysis**

Upon my first reading of the policy documents, I took a surface-level, descriptive approach and paid particular attention to each document's physical structure. This included the format of policies. My discovery that most of the district's school board policies used templates led me to investigate those further. Some of them followed templates provided by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), while others used templates and web hosting provided by a private firm that offers such services for all sorts of school board policies throughout the Great

Lakes region. In contrast, PE Plans showed greater diversity. However, some policies use a highly structured table format, which directly compares Section 1116 of Title I with the specific activities that the school pledges to undertake in fulfillment of their Title I obligations. This stage of analysis also led me to examine policy titles and pay particular attention to language such as guidelines, policy, or plan.

Just as I used critical parental engagement policy studies to conceptualize this study, I used that same framework in my critical analysis, as my analytical framework. This approach combines Diem & Young's (2015) five critical concerns of CPA with important dynamics from the critical parental engagement literature to investigate the implications of policy documents for access and equity for marginalized parents. Essentially, the five critical concerns served as my themes, and the parental engagement dynamics served as codes. This stage of my process involved reading my data again and coding pieces of data to corresponding concerns. For instance, if policy language expresses a belief in the connection between parental engagement and student success, I coded that as "notions of achievement" under the "difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality" critical concern. As I will discuss later, some data include language that is *not* present within the documents. In such cases, I used my knowledge of parental engagement topics and literature to determine important omissions and then code those accordingly. That was the final stage of my coding process. It is also important to note that, as is common in qualitative research, many data items fell into multiple codes and themes. Coding the data helped me solidify my conceptualization of each critical concern and differentiate between them in ways that I felt were meaningful but still acknowledged significant overlap.

**Trustworthiness**

Implementing trustworthiness measures to support a study is a keystone of well-conceptualized and well-executed research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leavy, 2017; Remler & Van Ryzin, 2015). A detailed reflection on my positionality within this study is an important trustworthiness measure in this study, aligning with my critical worldview (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This reflection allows readers to consider how my identity and experiences impact my work (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As I discussed earlier, an understanding of my historical and continuing social privileges motivates me to use those privileges to promote social justice. This project is an important avenue for me to illuminate damaging inequities in Michigan's educational system--in this case, schools of choice policy.

Another important step toward bolstering the trustworthiness of my data is triangulation through the amount and scope of the data I collected (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Merriam, 2002). My district data covers three different metropolitan areas (Detroit, Grand Rapids, and Lansing), two types of districts (urban and suburban), and two types of policies (school board policies and PE Plans). Although my data sources are all documents, this kind of diversity in document sources provides depth to the project and provides support for my claims. In particular, this collection of diverse documents allows me to see how different types of parental engagement policies are situated in different types of contexts. This triangulation provides multiple perspectives and different forms of evidence to investigate the same research questions.

I also support trustworthiness in this study through public disclosure and generating an audit trail. As Anfara et al. (2002) point out, qualitative research is an eclectic umbrella of inquiry, giving researchers the ability to engage numerous possible approaches. While this diversity is a strength of qualitative research, the authors urge the necessity of public disclosure

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of research procedures. The authors recommend that researchers disclose "how research questions are related to data sources, how themes or categories are developed, and how triangulation is accomplished" (p. 30). This detailed explanation gives readers the opportunity to learn about and evaluate the procedural work of a study. In this particular study, I engage in public disclosure through a thorough explanation of my research procedures, along with providing several visual representations of my research process. These include a table connecting my research questions, data sources, and trustworthiness measures; tables describing my data sources; and a code map. My generation of an audit trail is a related trustworthiness approach. This includes maintaining a detailed accounting of my research process, including data conceptualization and collection; data analysis; and direct connections between my study motivation and research questions. This account is bolstered by my extensive memoing throughout my research process. These measures provide documentation for audit and review by others and me in the future (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

Additionally, I have used peer consultation throughout my process of study design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes (Maxwell, 2013). This has included conversations about areas such as conceptualizing parent access and equity issues in parental engagement policy; formulating research questions to investigate this topic; developing my conceptual framework; conceptualizing my collection of parental engagement policy documents; strategizing and executing my analysis approach; and interpreting my findings. This particular project has spanned three years, and I have consulted with colleagues at every step of the way.

## Descriptive Findings

This section provides a view of descriptive findings. This stage of analysis included an assessment of descriptive document factors such as the format of policies, their content,

comparisons across districts, and the means by which I was able to access them during my data collection process. The following diagram displays, in brief, my descriptive coding approach. Unlike my deductive-dominant critical analysis, this descriptive stage involved a more inductive approach using the constant comparison method (Maxwell, 2013). My major themes address emergent issues within the data, including insights from the different forms of policy and my difficulties in retrieving several policy documents.

Figure 4: *Descriptive Code Map of District Parental Engagement Policies*



**Descriptive Code Map: District Parental Engagement Policies**

THEMES

| Board Policies | PE Plans | Accessibility |

CATEGORIES

- Widespread use of templates
- Limited urban/ suburban differences
- Limited equity language

- Great variation
- Differing equity focus
- Differing use of Title I language

- Accessible board policies
- Difficulty accessing most PE Plans
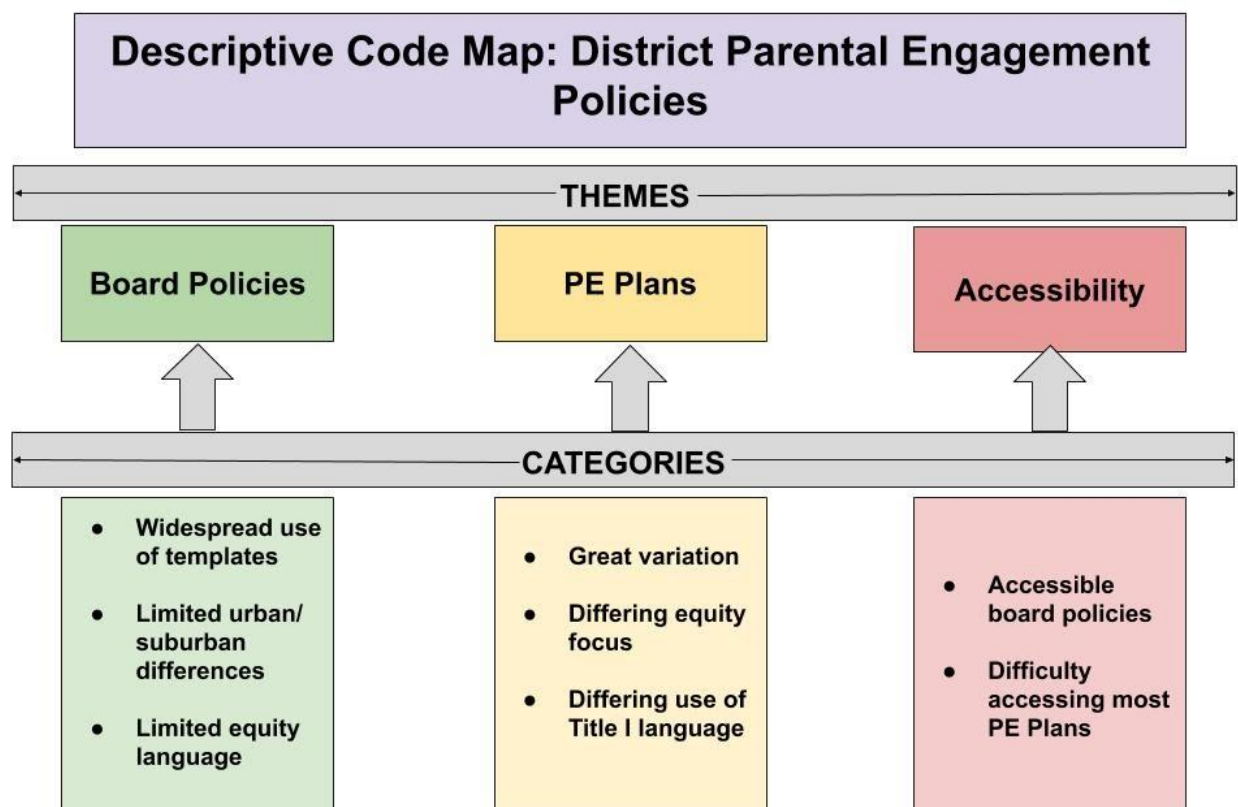
**School Board Policies**

My search for school board policies revealed one of the most interesting findings of this study. Given that school boards serve many legal oversight and accountability functions, it was to be expected that these documents would be relatively homogenous even across contexts.

However, it quickly became apparent that some documents from the districts in my study were nearly identical due to the widespread use of document templates. Two types of templates were used in all six board documents. One of these templates was created by MDE and disseminated in 2004, while the other was created by a private company called Neola.

The MDE template, used by the Grand Rapids, East Grand Rapids, and East Lansing school districts, is part of a subset of overall policy templates. These all contain the same policy codes (in this particular case, Section 7175 of each district's omnibus body of board bylaws and policies). The verbiage and structures of these policies are strikingly similar. Large blocks of text are identical, with just a few variations in the text of introductory paragraphs.

Two differences stand out across these three documents. Firstly, the Grand Rapids and East Lansing policies say that the board "encourages parent(s)/guardian(s) participation in *all school programs*" (p. 1, emphasis added). However, the East Grand Rapids policy states that the board "encourages parent(s)/guardian(s) participation in Title I programs" (emphasis added). Given that East Grand Rapids is a suburban district with no school-wide Title I buildings, this may indicate an orientation toward specifically serving Title I students through this policy but not focusing more broadly on the entire student population. Secondly, Grand Rapids has a more extensive section on services for parents of students in Migrant Education Program and English Language Learners (ELLs). The district's policy states that "The administration shall, to the extent practicable, provide full opportunities for the participation of parents/guardians with limited English proficiency, parent(s)/guardian(s) with disabilities, and parents/guardians of migratory children. . ." (p. 4-5). Grand Rapids also includes unique clauses regarding communicating with and educating parents about their rights and the work of schools and providing parents with training to foster parental engagement. As a result, the Grand Rapids

document is significantly longer than the other two. It contains about four pages of text, while the others contain just over two.

Three other districts within this study also use a template but an entirely different one (Neola template). Detroit, Ferndale, and Lansing adopted a policy template from a private company called Neola, which designs school board policy templates for 483 of the 891 public school districts in Michigan and provides webhosting for many of them. According to the company's website, Neola has a partnership with the Michigan Association of School Boards (Neola, 2020). These policy documents are remarkably short and contain about one page's worth of printed text. The Neola template features three sections: an introductory section that contains language on purposes and parent rights; one on activities that the district recommends schools implement; and one on parent responsibilities.

The policies for the three districts that use this template are nearly identical, with each of them containing just one short addition to a clause that the other does not. For instance, Ferndale's policy contains a clause stating that the board recommends "special events of a cultural, ethnic, or topical nature" (p.1). Lansing and Detroit contain the same clause but extend it, adding, ". . . which are initiated by parent groups, involve the cooperative effort of students and parents, and are of general interest to the schools or community" (p.1).

Despite the many similarities among these district documents, Detroit's board policy does have some important clauses that Ferndale and Lansing do not. These include provisions about scheduling parent visits to schools; pursuing parent-teacher home visits if parents are unable to come to the school; establishing a Parent Teacher Association; maintaining up-to-date contact information; and sharing concerns with the school through an established process. All three districts using this template feature a clause about "supporting special events of a cultural, ethnic,

or topical nature," but only Detroit and Lansing state that those events may be initiated by parents.

Given that the urban districts included a few more clauses in their policies that directly address issues of equity and inclusion of marginalized parent identity groups, there is a small amount of evidence that urban districts address such issues in policies more than suburban districts do. At the same time, policy documents themselves cannot reveal what the work of districts looks like when these policies are implemented. More research is needed to investigate how school board parental engagement policies impact this work.

**District PE Plans**

While the district school board policies within this study exhibit remarkable homogeneity, the district parental engagement plans are exceptionally different. Importantly, some of these districts are clearly not in compliance with the mandates of Title I, which state that all school districts receiving Title I funding must develop a PE plan. These include both Ferndale and East Lansing. Both of their district offices communicated to me that they do not have district engagement plans, although they did provide me with examples of school-level engagement plans. Additionally, I was unable to locate a district plan from Lansing. I give further description of my search process and document accessibility below.

The policy from Grand Rapids is particularly stark, with a short, simple table format that is merely a template for schools to use for their own policies. My contact at the district did inform me that each school has its own policy. There are two columns within the district document, with the left containing direct quotes from Title I mandates, labeled "NCLB Section" and the right containing action items, labeled "Ways in which Staff Accomplish These

Activities" (p.23). For instance, Section 1118[4](c)(1) in the left column requires that schools "Convene an Annual Title I Parent Meeting at a time convenient to parents to inform parents of the Title I requirements and their right to be involved" (p. 23). The corresponding right hand column reads, "An annual meeting is held which includes information for parents on. . ." (p. 23). The sentence is a fragment, to be completed by the school. There is no indication that parents had any say in what information was included within this district policy. There is no discussion of how the district will fulfill its own Title I responsibilities.

Although Ferndale does not have a district plan, my contact at the district office did provide me with policies from two of their schools, including one high school and one lower elementary. The high school policy is in a table format and directly links Title I language (in the left column marked "legislative citation") to actions that schools will take to fulfill these requirements (in the right column marked "plan to support parents"). The language repeatedly states that this policy is targeted at Title I parents, but there is no elaboration whatsoever of what social groups fall under that category and how the unique characteristics of those groups should be specifically attended to. However, there is a decent amount of elaboration on how schools will fulfill their duties to Title I parents. There is no statement about the adoption of this policy or who was involved in developing it.

The example lower elementary policy is also in table format but with a different arrangement that includes two sections. In the first section, objectives to fulfill Title I requirements are listed in the far-left column, with specific tasks, staff responsibilities, timelines, steps, and accountability/evaluations listed in the following columns. The second section includes Title I mandates on the left (although in this case there are no direct quotes of Title I

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[4] The 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1964 renumbered this section of Title I to Section 1116.

language) and how the school will meet those requirements on the right. Unlike the high school policy, the lower elementary policy states that it was co-developed with parents who served on the school improvement team.

In East Lansing, the policy provided for one of the elementary schools is the most extensive and thorough in my entire collection of documents. It spans eight pages and is highly detailed in the steps that the school will take in order to fulfill Title I requirements. The document does specifically address each mandatory Title I clause and several of the optional ones. It also states in the introduction that parents from each grade were involved in the development of this policy. The document lists many actions that the school pledges to undertake, such as ways that the district will provide communication to parents; joint development with parents of a school/parent/student compact; and providing materials and training to parents. However, there is no discussion of particular social groups that will be served. It seems that the implication is that services will be provided to all students and parents, not just those served by Title I. The activities listed include some events that are unique to the school and seem to have a goal of including more parents in the work that the school is already doing.

The Detroit and East Grand Rapids policies bear some interesting similarities in both their format and content. They are both over two pages in length but are written in memo format, giving them a more narrative style of language. They do still address many specific provisions from Title I, such as conducting an annual evaluation of parental engagement efforts by the district and parent participation in policy development. Someone who is not an expert in policy documents may not notice these connections because there are no direct ties to Title I clauses like we see in the table-style documents of other districts. However, there are also some points of

divergence between these two districts. East Grand Rapids sticks with the same language of the other policies in this collection, which reference special services for parents with disabilities and parents of migratory students and ELLs. In contrast, Detroit also includes in its language parents who are economically disadvantaged and those from "any racial or ethnic minority background." These groups are also included in Title I language, but there is an interesting pattern of omission on the part of all the other policy documents examined here.

**Overall Document Accessibility**

Although Title I very clearly indicates that districts must make their policies widely available to parents, my search process for these documents raises questions about access to them. I was able to successfully search for school board policies online. However, acquiring copies of district parental engagement plans was exceptionally difficult. The only one that I was able to locate online was Detroit's, which has its policy available on the district's parental engagement website. That document is available in English, Spanish, Arabic, Hmong, Romanian, and Bengali. This is a significant step toward accessibility for parents who are non-native English speakers and toward fulfilling a Title I requirement that policies be provided to parents in a language that they can understand. However, for all other districts I was forced to email district offices directly after exhaustive but unsuccessful online searches. As mentioned before, I was never able to acquire a copy of Lansing's district engagement plan despite many attempts to contact district offices via email. Given the difficulty that I had in accessing these documents, it is likely that parents would face similar difficulties. While it is possible that some schools distribute these policies to parents through printed copies or via email, it is clear that many parents would need to contact districts or schools directly to access those documents again. Further, some documents may be unavailable unless specifically requested.

**Critical Findings**

In addition to a descriptive understanding of these district parental engagement documents, a critical analysis is vital to learning about the access and equity implications within these contexts. I draw on my conceptual framework of CPA and critical parental engagement literature to analyze the many important dynamics at work within the school districts that I examine. The following figure illustrates my deductive-dominant coding process, with concepts from CPA acting as themes, concepts from parental engagement literature acting as categories, and my data feeding into the concepts.

Figure 5: *Critical Code Map of District Parental Engagement Policies*
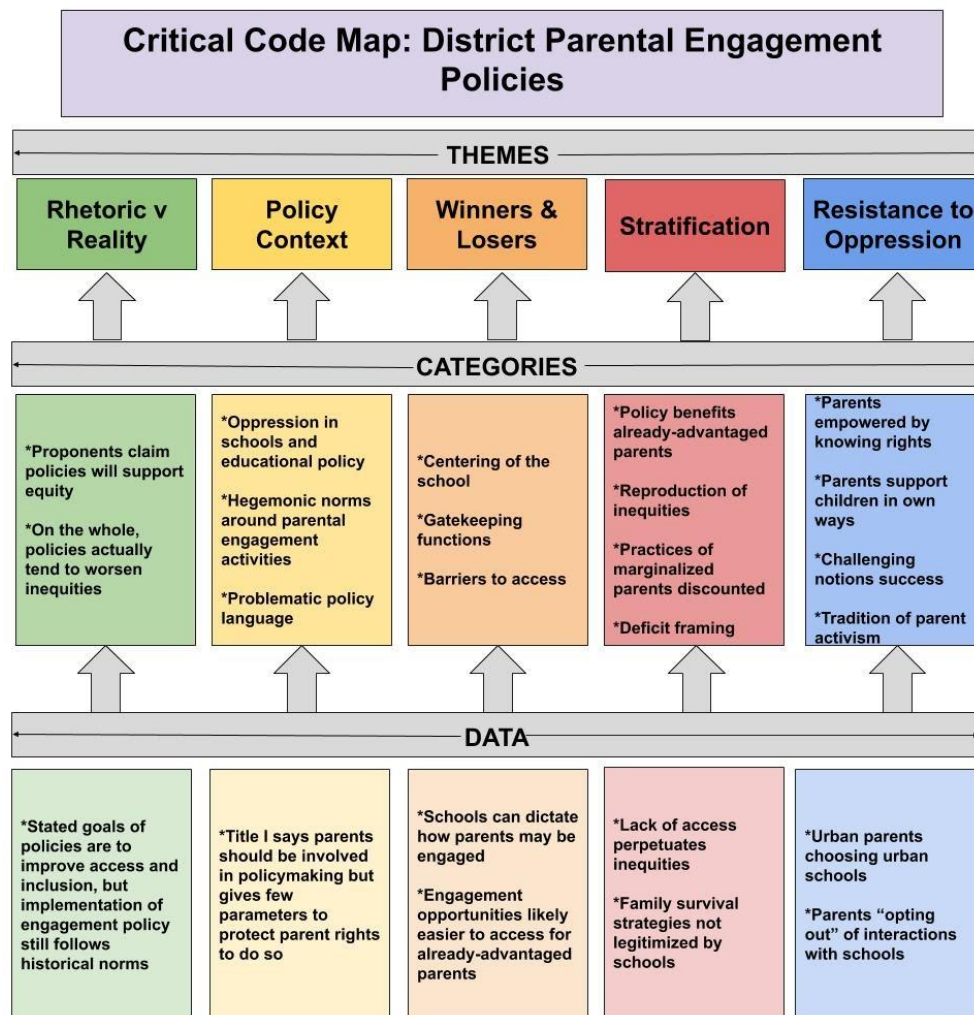
**Policy Rhetoric vs. Practiced Reality**

Table 8: *Concern Regarding the Difference between Policy Rhetoric and Practiced Reality*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| **1. Concern regarding the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality** | • Proponents claim policies will support equity<br>• On the whole, policies actually tend to worsen inequities | • Stated goals of policies are to improve access and inclusion, but implementation of engagement policy still follows historical norms |

Rhetoric of these policies is based on a very clear assumption: that parental engagement leads to student success. According to the policy document, Detroit's policy "is based upon the belief that supporting partnerships between families and schools is necessary to improve schools and reinforce the importance of student achievement." This kind of belief is the impetus for parental engagement policy and its implementation, as evidenced by East Grand Rapids PE Plan language: "In order to build the capacity of schools and parents/guardians for strong parental performance…" This assumed link between parental engagement and student achievement is deeply embedded in Title I policy, so it is no surprise that those notions are embedded in district-level policy as well. However, literature on the link between the two is mixed, with critical scholars arguing that correlation does not equal causation and questioning the metrics used to define both achievement and engagement (Baquedano-López et al., (2013).

Further, we should also consider the intent of these policies, particularly in light of this reliance on language from higher-jurisdiction policies. These policies appear to focus greatly on compliance, and several of them even note the federal policy statutes with which they comply. This focus on compliance and managerialism is common in district and school-level policy (Trujillo, 2014). This emphasis on box-checking while maintaining overall vagueness of intent

may also protect educational entities from liability. The inclusion of several "may" clauses further muddies the waters, meaning that districts have the choice whether to follow certain provisions or not.

We should also consider who the intended audience for these policies is. Title I mandates that policies must be distributed to parents. However, some policies, like those for East Grand Rapids, state that they apply only to participating Title I parents and not entire schools. This is an important distinction, as it means that, at least in theory, districts that use that language could choose to only extend these policy provisions to parents whose children receive Title I funding. In more affluent districts that do not have any building-wide Title I schools, this may impact the resources that districts are willing to expend on parental engagement.

It is unclear how much these policies actually guide the work of districts. School policies do seem to have more specific action items. However, the perfunctory nature of policies again seems to promote compliance with state and federal law over direct and useful guidance for practitioners. Just as important as what these policies say is what they do not say. None of these documents include ideas such as district values or core principles. While these documents do tend to list several activities that districts will do in order to engage parents, there is little discussion of why this work matters. There is also no discussion of what parents might want out of their relationships with districts or what parents value in education.

**Policy Context**

Table 9: *Concern Regarding the Policy, Its Roots, and Its Development (Context)*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| **2. Concern regarding the policy, its roots, and its development (context)** | <ul><li>Historical and contemporary context of oppression in schools and educational policy</li><li>Hegemonic norms around parental engagement activities</li><li>Problematic parental engagement policy language</li></ul> | <ul><li>Title I says parents should be involved in policymaking but gives few parameters to protect parent rights to do so</li></ul> |

As with any policy, these parental engagement policies did not come about in a vacuum. They are mandated by Title I policy as well as MDE. Given the hierarchical nature of these parental engagement policies, there are in fact certain important provisions with which districts must comply. For instance, districts must actively communicate with parents and provide resources to schools for parental engagement, and these policy documents reflect that.

However, another important requirement is that districts work with parents to design policies. Much of the language used in most policies is directly lifted from Title I parental engagement policy. MDE template policies do contain references to Title I and direct quotes of some of its language, as does Detroit's. Neola template policies do not mention Title I. This seems to be directly in contradiction with the involvement of parents in the development of these policies. If parents had been meaningfully involved, surely the language of each policy would be at least somewhat unique to each context. While it does seem that some school level policies have some building-specific language, the district policies are canned and perfunctory. While we cannot be sure within the scope of this study about the nature of parental input in policies, questions about that process are certainly warranted.

Further, the widespread absence of the discussion of local context is a matter of concern. The districts investigated in this study vary greatly in geography, student population, and demographic makeup. Some districts have many marginalized students, while others have just a few. Different communities certainly bring their own sets of needs, concerns, values, and assets. None of these policies make clear connections between the localized reality of their districts, nor do they discuss what may be the unique needs of parents within their districts. While centralized educational policies do have an important role in upholding the rights of marginalized people in local settings, a community-based approach to policymaking has many advantages to a heavy commitment to a one-size-fits-all approach.

Like many northern school districts, Michigan districts have some contextual issues that make capacity for policy development and implementation challenging. School districts in Michigan are run at the municipal level instead of the county level, meaning that many districts are relatively small and have limited resources to regulate policy. As mentioned before, many districts hire companies for school board policy templates and webhosting. This outsourcing may come at the price of policy relevance within educational communities, but funding and capacity are influential constraints. Just as importantly, districts must have the human resources to undertake the challenging work of authentic partnerships with parents, including policy development work.

**Creation of Winners & Losers**

Table 10: *Concern with the Distribution of Power, Resources, and Knowledge as well as the*

*Creation of Policy "Winners" and "Losers"*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| **3. Concern with the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge as well as the creation of policy "winners" and "losers"** | <ul><li>Centering of the school</li><li>Gatekeeping functions</li><li>Logistical, social, and emotional barriers</li></ul> | <ul><li>Schools largely dictate how parents may be engaged</li><li>Engagement opportunities are likely easier to access for already-advantaged parents</li></ul> |

Throughout these policies, we see power dynamics that have important implications for how parental engagement may play out in districts. Policy language is very school-centric, with talk of school activities such as events and educating parents about the work of schools. As Baquedano-López et al. (2013) point out, approaches that center the school often prioritize a highly normative conceptualization of parental engagement and discount the ways that marginalized parents already support their children. As I discuss above, there are few reasons to believe that these documents represent the values, priorities, and voices of parents. This power differential in policy has concerning implications for the practices of parental engagement as well.

These power issues are also present in the assumptions about parent resources that these policies make. Some districts, like Detroit, do state that schools should make efforts to accommodate parent needs by offering to provide technological support, help with transportation to school events or conduct home visits. However, marginalized parents are likely to have less access than their more advantaged counterparts because of differences in time, financial, and

logistical resources. Access to information about policies is also an important issue. Parents feel more empowered and are more engaged with schools when they know their rights (Kim, 2006), but those benefits cannot be realized if districts and schools do not share that information with parents in the first place. These issues are compounded by language factors if parents need language resources provided in a language other than English (Baquedano-López et al., 2013).

Examination of the types of activities that these policies promote is also important. The activities listed are very normative and do not acknowledge the many other ways in which target parents support the education of their children. Moreover, schools are given the power to act as gatekeepers to parents through policy language that allows them to involve parents in various efforts "to the extent practicable" and "as appropriate." Although this is the language that Title I employs, districts and schools do have the freedom to commit more specifically and forcefully to the full inclusion of parents in the work of schools and the decisions that are made about their governance. Communication, a repeated theme within these documents, is not enough to ensure that parents' voices are an integral part of the educational process.

These power differentials have the potential to create winners and losers through the policy. Although the original intent of Title I was to benefit marginalized parents, the trickle-down of policy language and the vagueness of the initial policy text means that these district policies may simply offer more opportunities to already-advantaged parents in Michigan.

**Reproduction of Social Stratification**

Table 11: *Concern Regarding Stratification and the Broader Effect a Given Policy Has on*

*Relationships of Inequality and Privilege*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| **4. Concern regarding stratification and the broader effect a given policy has on relationships of inequality and privilege** | • Policy tends to benefit already-advantaged parents<br>• Reproduction and potential worsening of inequalities and inequities through policy<br>• Practices of marginalized parents discounted<br>• Framing marginalized parents as uncaring and deficient | • Continued lack of access to engagement opportunities perpetuates inequities<br>• Family survival strategies, though vital, not legitimized by schools |

This creation of winners and losers plays into the troubling dynamic of stratification throughout the parental engagement policy context in Michigan. The documents are almost totally devoid of discussions of what groups are targeted for intervention, with just a few mentions in some of the documents of parents with disabilities and parents of migratory children and ELLs. Therefore, explicit discussions of racial and class groups are largely absent. As mentioned before, the district documents studied here employ language that is intensely conventional and traditional in nature. Expectations are in close alignment with traditional activities that align with white, middle-class norms and values. This is despite the fact that these policies are aimed at increasing the participation of historically disadvantaged groups. Language is oriented to bring parents into the school through the same sorts of opportunities that have always existed rather than push schools to change in order to accommodate for the assets, values, needs, and desires of parents. Ignoring the positionality of marginalized groups and the cultural wealth that they bring to relationships with educators is a systemic problem in educational policy and the educational institutions on the whole (Bensimon et al., 2018; Yosso, 2005).

These policies are also fundamentally color-evasive regarding the ways in which parents of color have been and are marginalized by schools (Annamma et al., 2017). As Leonardo (2013) points out, "Parents of color are seen as obstacles to governance for not showing up at events" (p. 20), but so many of the actions that parents of color do take to support their children are profoundly undervalued.

This framing of parents as a problem to be solved, along with the lack of recognition of and engagement with ideas of systemic racism within educational systems, perpetuates the marginalization of families of color and other oppressed groups (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Calabrese Barton et al., 2004; Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Baquedano-López et al. (2013) refer to this framing as "neodeficit discourse" that inhibit parents' ability to be full social actors and have agency within schools. While some policies like Detroit's include words like partnership, there is little indication that districts are committed to building partnerships with parents of color and parents living in poverty in authentic and meaningful ways. The perpetuation of these disparities means that already-privileged parents are more likely to be able to take advantage of any new engagement opportunities and shape the nature of opportunities in the future (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003; Posey-Maddox, 2014).

**Resistance to Oppression**

Table 12: *Concern Regarding the Nature of Resistance to or Engagement in Policy by Members of Non-Dominant Groups*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| **5. Concern regarding the nature of resistance to or engagement in policy by members of non-dominant groups** | • Marginalized parents support children in their own ways<br>• Parents empowered by knowing their rights<br>• Challenging notions of what achievement and success mean<br>• Tradition of parent activism | • Urban parents choosing urban schools<br>• Parents "opting out" of interactions with schools |

Unfortunately, a policy discussion about the potential engagement of marginalized parents is equally defined by what policy documents *do not* say than what they *do*. The policy documents examined here leave out myriad vital engagement practices that parents use to support education, both within and outside of schools. However, it is essential to discuss the many, many ways that parents do support the education of their children, whether or not schools play a role in facilitating that. Several scholars give insight into the vital roles of parents. These practices include cultivating membership within faith communities, learning from elders, civic engagement, cultural experiences, and recreation, just to name a few.

Leading scholars who study parental engagement among marginalized parents help fill in the picture of the many ways that parents support their children. Phelps-Moultrie (2016) provides the concept of Black parental protectionism, which includes parents' efforts to understand how schooling affects the lives and success of Black children, to identify how racism and white supremacy cause harm to their children, and to instill a practice of racial vigilance in order to protect children from the harsh realities of systemic oppression. DePouw & Matias (2016)

provide a complementary understanding through their concept of critical race parenting. They state, "Frankly, to literally survive racism and the violence brought about by White supremacy, communities of color have long recognized the need for instilling in their/our children a critical understanding of institutional racism, as well as the strategies and identities essential to collective and individual health, safety, and endurance" (p. 237). The authors highlight the ways that parents of color contribute to their children's wellbeing by supporting healthy emotional development, resilience in the face of oppression, and learning how to fight racism and work toward the abolition of racial oppression.

### Discussion & Implications

One goal of this study was to investigate any potential differences between the policies of urban and suburban districts. Taking board policies into account, there are, in fact, more similarities than differences across contexts. This is evidenced by the fact that some urban and suburban districts have nearly identical board policies. This finding raises interesting questions of the capacity of school boards to develop policies. Given that school districts in Michigan are often quite small and school boards are comprised mostly of non-educators, boards may not have the capacity to write policies on their own. However, the Grand Rapids policy did pay more attention to specific populations such as migrant students and ELLs. Such provisions may be a response to large numbers of students within the district who fall into the identity groups mentioned in the document. In the same vein, Detroit has clauses about in-home visits and the establishment of a Parent-Teacher Association. No patterns were observed across the collection of district parental engagement plans. While two suburban districts admitted to not having parental engagement plans, it is unclear whether Lansing, an urban district, has one either.

Additionally, the urban district of Detroit and the suburban district of East Grand Rapids have similarly extensive parental engagement plans.

The content of these policies is also of interest in this study. In general, the language used in all documents is focused on compliance and fulfilling mandates from Title I. Although none of these documents is written in language as technical as legalese, the tone of these policies suggests a managerial, compliance-centered approach to the development and implementation of them. Surely, districts have many legal responsibilities that they must fulfill and codify through policy documents. It is to be expected that school boards in particular prioritize language that protects the district and its stakeholders. At the same time, the general lack of specific, intentional discussions of the students that are targeted for Title I intervention, particularly students living in poverty and students of color, is troubling. Without a doubt, these policies and others like it can do more to recognize the values, assets, needs, and desires of Title I-participating families (Baquedano-López et al., 2008; Calabrese Barton et al., 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lareau, 2000). The fundamentally color-evasive language of these policies is certainly cause for concern given that policies that do not directly address power dynamics may actually perpetuate them (Crozier, 2001; Webster, 2004). The ability of districts to protect their legal interests need not come at the expense of inclusive language that prioritizes access and equity.

Another important point of discussion is Title I's mandate that parents be involved in the development of district parental engagement plans themselves. Although these plans are more diverse than the board policies, there is a great deal of recycled language taken directly from Title I. Therefore, we must question whether parents truly do have a say in the development of these documents. Contributing to this development process is an important opportunity for

schools to collaborate with parents and learn directly from the source about the assets, values, needs, and desires about parents of color and parents living in poverty. Districts that do not engage parents in this way are not only violating Title I mandates but are also abandoning their duty to build authentic partnerships with parents.

Parental engagement policy documents are just one of many facets of parental engagement work. However, as Webster (2004) argues, they are an essential place to start in evaluating where districts are in their efforts to build vibrant school communities and authentic partnerships with parents. Such partnerships are difficult endeavors, but they are worth it. Policy documents can have a vital guiding influence on the work of schools and districts. That is why districts should prioritize a collaborative, inclusive policy process that foregrounds access and equity for marginalized parents. Further, districts should ensure that their vision for partnership is embedded within policies themselves, encompassing the assets, values, needs, and desires of not just educators but parents as well. In turn, federal and state policymakers should provide districts with the logistical, financial, and human resources necessary to engage in this very important work.

### Limitations & Future Research

As I have discussed throughout this paper, my goal in this work was to examine the access and equity implications of district parental engagement policy documents. As such, this study investigates just a slice of the issue of parental engagement policy. While the language and context of policy documents are important, these data can only tell so much about the policy environment as a whole. This study does not investigate the real-world use of policy and how policies influence the relationships between parents and educators. For instance, policy documents cannot tell us how well any given district engages parents, regardless of the nature of

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that district's policy documents. Documents also cannot tell us the actual priorities of their authors and implementers. Having a substantial, comprehensive policy does not necessarily mean that a district does a good job engaging parents. At the same time, having a poor policy or no policy at all does not mean that a district does not pursue partnerships with parents in an effective and equitable manner. For these reasons, my claims are limited to the form and content of policy documents, along with the ways that policy language may present impactful challenges to access and equity for marginalized parents.

This study bears many opportunities for further investigation into these issues. For instance, this study is limited by its small collection of examined policy documents. An expansion to include even more districts would lend further insight into potential policy trends in different types of districts throughout Michigan. A widened geographic scope could be complemented by an analysis of other parental engagement policy documents such as parent-teacher-student compacts and student handbooks. Another important direction would be conducting interviews with key stakeholders about the policy development process and accessibility to these policy documents. Interesting questions would include who is involved in the process of developing such policies, why school boards so commonly choose temples for their policies, and how districts make policies available to parents.

APPENDIX

**Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies: A Conceptual Framework**

The table below illustrates this study's conceptual framework. The left-hand column displays the five critical concerns taken from Diem & Young (2015), which the center column shows the concepts that I take from the critical parental engagement literature. In the right-hand column, I give examples of how my framework offers a way of understanding the real-world impacts of parental engagement policy.

Table 13: *Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies: A Conceptual Framework*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| **1. Concern regarding the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality** | • Proponents claim policies will support equity<br>• On the whole, policies actually tend to worsen inequities | • Stated goals of policies are to improve access and inclusion, but implementation of engagement policy still follows historical norms |
| **2. Concern regarding the policy, its roots, and its development (context)** | • Historical and contemporary context of oppression in schools and educational policy<br>• Hegemonic norms around parental engagement activities<br>• Problematic parental engagement policy language | • Title I says parents should be involved in policymaking but gives few parameters to protect parent rights to do so |
| **3. Concern with the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge as well as the creation of policy "winners" and "losers"** | • Centering of the school<br>• Gatekeeping functions<br>• Logistical, social, and emotional barriers | • Schools largely dictate how parents may be engaged<br>• Engagement opportunities are likely easier to access for already-advantaged parents |
| **4. Concern regarding stratification and the broader effect a given policy has on relationships of inequality and privilege** | • Policy tends to benefit already-advantaged parents<br>• Reproduction and potential worsening of inequalities and inequities through policy<br>• Practices of marginalized parents discounted<br>• Framing marginalized parents as uncaring and deficient | • Continued lack of access to engagement opportunities perpetuates inequities<br>• Family survival strategies, though vital, not legitimized by schools |
| **5. Concern regarding the nature of resistance to or engagement in policy by members of non-dominant groups** | • Marginalized parents support children in their own ways<br>• Parents empowered by knowing their rights<br>• Challenging notions of what achievement and success mean<br>• Tradition of parent activism | • Urban parents choosing urban schools<br>• Parents "opting out" of interactions with schools |

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**PAPER II: A CRITICAL POLICY ANALYSIS OF PARENT ACCESS TO SCHOOLS OF CHOICE POLICY IN MICHIGAN**

**Introduction, Motivation, & Research Questions**

For the last twenty-five years, many metropolitan areas in Michigan have seen unprecedented shifts in public school student populations as a result of statewide school choice legislation. Since the passage of Public Act 300 of 1996, the state has maintained one of the most robust school choice environments in the United States (Pogodzinski et al., 2018; Addonizio & Kearney, 2012). This law ensconced the statewide policy of voluntary interdistrict choice, more commonly known in Michigan as schools of choice. The policy allows students to transfer to public school districts other than the ones in which they reside. Although districts can elect not to participate, over 90% of districts do accept transfer students (Pogodzinski et al., 2017). So long as districts have open seats and are willing to accept transfer students, students may transfer to districts within the same intermediate school district (ISD) or a contiguous one.[5] This policy also has important school funding implications, as students' per-pupil foundation funding—sitting at about $8,100 for the 2019-2020 school year (Summers, 2019) –transfers with the student when they transfer to different public schools. While interdistrict transfer occurs throughout the state, the policy has produced an intriguing dynamic of students from urban districts transferring to suburban ones in large numbers. This shift in students and funding has led to shifting social and economic relationships in metropolitan areas throughout the state.

Despite the new, voluntary permeability of school district boundaries, Michigan's policies carry important barriers to access for many families. Although thousands of students transfer across district lines every year, districts are allowed to explicitly restrict transfers in

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[5] In Michigan, ISD's are educational support agencies comprised of one or more counties, and they provide several forms of supplemental educational services to local educational agencies.

certain circumstances. Important logistical, informational, and social barriers make transfer difficult or impossible as well. While proponents of schools of choice policy have claimed that choice increases the number and quality of educational opportunities available to historically marginalized students and their parents (Coleman, 1992), persistent barriers to access may mean that already-advantaged students are actually more likely to benefit from choice.

Early proponents of the policy employed several arguments to advance schools of choice through the Michigan legislature and broaden its appeal to voters. Some said that allowing parents to send their children to the school they wanted was just common sense (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Others stated that urban schools would improve with the introduction of competition pressures from neighboring districts. Most importantly, many proponents argued that schools of choice was a big step toward greater educational equity for historically disadvantaged students. As the argument went, parents whose students were assigned to struggling neighborhood schools deserved the same opportunity to send their children to great schools as wealthier parents had. They noted that the hard boundaries of school districts forced parents to move to a more advantageous district or send their children to private school, options that are prohibitively expensive for many families. This ideological view is held by Former Gov. John Engler, widely regarded as the principal architect of school choice in Michigan (Thelen et al., 2019).

This study investigates several important aspects of schools of choice policies in Michigan, paying particular attention to the language of the policies--and what important matters are left out of the documents. I also give some attention to the damaging effects of these policies within metropolitan educational markets and particularly for urban districts. This critical document analysis approach to exploring these choice policies represents an important avenue for research. I leverage critical policy analysis (Diem & Young, 2015) to interrogate the context

of the policy and the power dynamics that come to bear upon access issues embedded in the policy. I draw on several important bodies of literature to conceptualize this topic, including literature on schools of choice, parental engagement, and anti-racist theories on education. Combining knowledge from research in this diverse set of literature bases makes novel contributions to our understanding of challenges to access and equity in schools of choice policies in Michigan.

In order to investigate these dynamics, I propose the following research questions:

1. What are the form and content of Michigan's schools of choice policy documents?
2. How does the language of Michigan's schools of choice policies impact parent and student access to school choice opportunities?
3. What challenges to access and equity are embedded within the policies?

**Scope of This Work**

Before moving forward, I should address the scope of this work. There are several interrelated and highly important aspects of schools of choice issues that this paper does not investigate. For instance, this paper looks at schools of choice policy documents and conceptualizes their implications for districts and parents. However, the actual implementation of the choice process within districts is a matter for future investigation. Further, I do not investigate the related but different policy of *intradistrict school choice*, or the transfer of students within the same district but to schools other than the ones to which they are assigned based on housing location. Additionally, this paper only tangentially addresses the many important implications of choice policy for urban districts. In metropolitan areas across the state of Michigan, urban districts have experienced plummeting student enrollments, extreme financial hardships, and major shifts in racial demographic patterns (Pogodzinski et al., 2018). Because

the present work focuses on the barriers set by schools of choice policy, those stark implications are generally beyond the scope of this paper. Further, work regarding the consequences for students of color who attend predominantly white institutions makes important contributions to our understanding of the challenges many urban transfer students may face (Venzant Chambers & Huggins, 2014). More work regarding the experiences of transfer students and their families would be a welcome expansion on my work here regarding the important implications of schools of choice policy documents.

## Policy Background

The passage of schools of choice policy in Michigan was a major legislative priority for former Republican Gov. John Engler and the Republican-led state legislature in the 1990s. Schools of choice policy in Michigan was part of a suite of neoliberal agenda items that focused on reforming school funding and establishing school choice throughout the state. One notable and closely related reform is Proposal A of 1994, which transitioned the funding system from an almost exclusive reliance on property tax bases toward a central foundation allowance from the state for each pupil. This meant that funding would be allocated from the state to each student instead of from local property taxes to the district. While the law did even out some funding disparities across districts, it also addressed a great deal of discontent among property owners who felt that taxes were exorbitant (Plank & Sykes, 2000). Proposal A is still in effect, and property taxes that go to districts for instructional expenses are capped at 1.8%.[6]

The connection between school funding streams and school choice policy is particularly important in this context. As I discuss later, previous schools of choice experiments in other states like Ohio had seen only minor success in encouraging district participation because full

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[6] Districts may still ask voters for property tax support for non-instructional expenses such as infrastructure, facilities, and technology.

funding was not guaranteed to accompany students who transferred (Fowler, 1996). Michigan's

Proposal A mitigated those funding concerns for receiving districts because per-pupil funding

travels with students when they transfer. Reinforcing this connection between schools of choice

policy and school funding, administration of the policy is overseen by the Michigan Department

of Education Office of State Aid and School Finance.

Although schools of choice in Michigan is often discussed as a single policy, it is actually

comprised of two policies in which districts may participate. Section 105 regulates the transfer of

students within the same intermediate ISD, while Section 105c regulates transfers to contiguous

ISDs. This distinction has important implications for district participation. While many districts

elect to participate in both policies, some choose to only participate in Section 105. Others open

a separate number of seats for students transferring under each policy. Most offer more seats to

Section 105 students, but some offer more to Section 105c students. Given that funding for

students is the same or nearly the same for students regardless of which district they live in, these

district participation choices are likely based on highly localized contextual factors.

As I will discuss further, the most important policy distinction between these two laws is

the provision regarding special education funding. In Michigan, ISDs are generally charged with

allocating special education dollars. Some also offer special education services. Therefore,

student transfer within an ISD has no consequences for funding. These issues are more

complicated under Section 105c, however. If a student wishes to transfer to a school district

within a different ISD than the one in which the student resides, the sending and receiving

districts must come to an agreement about who will pay for services. When discrepancies arise

between available funding streams, ISDs sometimes disagree about who should cover the

difference. If the two organizations are unable to come to a financial agreement, the student may be denied transfer and forced to remain within the district of residence.

## Conceptual Framework: Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies

My conceptual framework combines two major concepts that drive my understanding of the influence of policy on access and equity in parental engagement issues. Firstly, I draw from CPA and, more specifically, Diem & Young's (2015) "5 Critical Concerns." The authors developed these ideas through an extensive appraisal of their own work and existing CPA literature. Specifically, this framework helps me conceptualize issues like the influence of policy context on potential outcomes and the ways that policy may perpetuate already-existing inequities in schools. I then map important parental engagement dynamics from the literature onto these critical concerns to develop an understanding of how power is embedded within and enacted through parental engagement policy. Influential concepts include parents as choosers (Baquedano-López et al., 2013), problematic policy language (Crozier, 2001; Pollack, 2008), and the framing of parents as both the problem and the solution to reforming education (Auerbach, 2011; Lightfoot, 2004). Taken together, I call this framework *critical parental engagement policy studies*.

In the specific context of schools of choice policy, I see this framework manifest in several ways. As an important aspect of parental engagement, accessing school choice policy (and in this case, schools of choice policy) bears many of the same attributes of interactions between parents and the educational system. For instance, consistencies include the stated intentions of policymakers to promote equity, barriers to access for marginalized parents, and the centering of schools in educational efforts. One way that school choice policy brings up somewhat unique parental engagement issues is the practical and ideological framing of choice.

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Many proponents of the policy lean on rational choice theory in their arguments, laying a groundwork for many assumptions about what it means to be a good parent, what information is available about the policies, and how parents approach choice decisions. Critical parental engagement policy studies provides tools to consider the implications of schools of choice policy, particularly regarding the parents who proponents claimed they wished to empower.

The following diagram illustrates the connections among Diem & Young's (2015) five critical concerns, the parental engagement dynamics that arise in this topic, and some examples of how my conceptual framework becomes salient in my data of schools of choice policy documents.[7]

Figure 6: *Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies: A Conceptual Framework*



**Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies: A Conceptual Framework**

**5 CRITICAL CONCERNS**

| Rhetoric v Reality | Policy Context | Winners & Losers | Stratification | Resistance to Oppression |

**PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT DYNAMICS**

| Rhetoric v Reality | Policy Context | Winners & Losers | Stratification | Resistance to Oppression |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Rhetoric of equity<br><br>*Reality of harm<br><br>*Parents as choosers<br><br>*Neoliberal ideology | *Oppression in schools and educational policy<br><br>*Segregation context<br><br>*High district participation<br><br>*Ignoring context of oppression | *Barriers to access for marginalized parents<br><br>*Introduction of interdistrict competition<br><br>*Complex financial pressures | *Benefits for already-advantaged parents<br><br>*Problematic policy language<br><br>*Reproduction of inequities<br><br>*Marginalization of transfer students | *Parents empowered by knowing their rights<br><br>*Challenging normative notions of achievement and success<br><br>*Tradition of parent activism |

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[7] For a more in-depth visual representation of this conceptual framework, see the table in Appendix C.

**Statement of Positionality & Ethical Commitments**

This work is motivated by my longstanding commitment to investigating and exposing oppression within Michigan's educational system in general and its schools of choice policies in particular. As I investigate the topic of parent access to schools of choice policy and the many challenges to equity that policy provides, it is essential that I consider my own positionality within this work (Denzin, 2017). One useful way of reflecting upon my positionality is through the insider/outsider paradigm. As Obasi (2014) describes, researchers carry certain aspects of their work, based on factors like identity and experience, that frame a personal relationship with a topic. On the other hand, certain important aspects of identity within the scope of a topic may be largely outside the identity and experience of a researcher.

In the context of this project, several factors make me a relative insider to the topic of schools of choice in Michigan. I am a Michigander who is dedicated to the expansion of high-quality education for all students in Michigan, grounded in a community schooling model. I also have a mixed educational background. Although I was not a schools of choice student in my youth, I did attend a Catholic school for much of my schooling. I come from a working-class family and received scholarships to pay for my tuition, but I am still a beneficiary of school choice. Attending a parochial school is different from attending a public school in a different school district, but both of these educational options fall under the umbrella of school choice.

I am also a graduate of a large, public, urban high school in Grand Rapids, Michigan. My alma mater saw a precipitous decline in student population due to schools of choice before I graduated, and that population decline has continued to have a major influence on the educational opportunities available to parents and students to this day. My high school

experience gave me firsthand knowledge of the devastating consequences that schools of choice policy has brought upon urban schools.

My research is also influenced in important ways by my outsider status within this project. I am a white person with typical abilities. I was born in the U.S. and learned English as my first language. All of these identities are privileged by Michigan's schools of choice policy. As I explain throughout this paper, those like me typically have greater access to the benefits of this policy.

Two other identities make me an outsider in this study. The goal of this work is to investigate how Michigan's schools of choice policy presents challenges to access and equity for marginalized parents in the state. It is important to note that I am neither a parent nor a policymaker. I do not have personal experience with the challenges that many parents face in supporting the education of their children, including working through administrative and logistical processes like applying for transfer through schools of choice. I also do not have experience crafting policy that affects hundreds of districts and potentially millions of families across the state.

In recognizing my positionality in relation to issues of school choice in Michigan, I am driven to use my research as a means of greater understanding of these issues. As a person who has experienced several important aspects of privilege throughout my education and career, I have a strong sense of purpose and responsibility in bringing to light many of the injustices that are perpetuated through schools of choice policy (Lensmire et al., 2013). My commitments manifest in this project in several ways, from the policy documents I selected to my analysis process to the conclusions I draw from my findings. I embrace my subjectivity and openly acknowledge that my goal in this study is to find and expose challenges to access and equity in

schools of choice policies. This motivation is grounded in an understanding that the U.S. education system is founded on racist, classist oppression (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and that educational policy is a reflection of that inequity (Webster, 2004). Although I do identify a few aspects of these policies that may in fact provide greater educational access for marginalized students, this critical orientation leads me to focus on the potential of policy language to perpetuate the oppression of marginalized parents and their children.

## Review of the Literature

The literature that I draw upon falls into two main areas: parental engagement literature (including work specific to parental engagement policy) and literature pertaining to parent roles in school choice. I use the parental engagement literature to construct an important backdrop for the place of parents within education and the ways that power dynamics play out between the educational system and marginalized parents. My selection of choice literature addresses more specifically the important parental engagement practice of parents selecting the schools that their children attend.

### Parental Engagement Literature

I conducted my literature search using major academic search tools, including SearchPlus, JStor, and ERIC. After discovering a paucity of articles on my topic of parental engagement, I chose to include some international articles in my reading list. Context is an important factor in considering similarities and differences among any studies. It is true that any international contexts will have important differences from the US educational system and its body of governing educational policies. However, I did see common themes across pieces that addressed issues like the importance of inclusion of all families in parental engagement efforts. Additionally, most articles focus on the marginalization of many families in the work of parental

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engagement and the potential for parental engagement policy to actually perpetuate existing inequalities. Therefore, most of these international articles seem to take a critical stance in their analysis of parental engagement policy issues. These selections were complemented by more general parental engagement literature that I have compiled through coursework and my previous research work.

There is extensive literature on the general topic of parental engagement. However, the subtopic that is of particular interest to this study focuses on access and equity issues in parental engagement opportunities. At the forefront of this discussion is the predominance of schools as white institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Because the modern US school system was formed by white people, for white people, the work of schools has historically recognized the needs, desires, values, and assets of white students and families, often at the expense of families of color. These inequities are observed in the work of parental engagement in schools, as several scholars point to persistent disadvantages for parents of color and low-income families (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Calabrese Barton et al., 2004; Posey-Maddox, 2014).

Another important angle in the general literature involves the narrow parameters of excepted parental engagement activities and the assumptions that are made about parents who do not fit that mold. Several scholars note that oftentimes educators assume that parents who do not meet those expectations do not care about their children or their education (Compton-Lilly, 2004; Lightfoot, 2004). These assumptions often lead to dysfunctional or nonexistent relationships between schools and families. Even when educators say that they desire to build mutually supportive partnerships, Auerbach (2009) and Lareau (2000) find that those educators actually want parents to support school efforts on the school's terms. Educators often exhibit little desire

for a truly reciprocal relationship. Such reciprocity would require schools to relinquish a certain amount of control--and therefore power--to parents. However, encouraging examples do exist of authentic partnerships yielding major positive returns for student success and community building (Auerbach, 201; Sanders & Harvey, 2002).

Important themes and perspectives also emerge from the literature that directly addresses parental engagement policy. This is a very small body of literature, but some insightful research does exist. For instance, Crozier (2001) discusses the deracialization of policy rhetoric, resulting in the sidestepping of educational issues that specifically affect students of color. This relates closely to Pollock's (2008) arguments about the necessity of precise language and the perils of colormuteness in educational endeavors. Additionally, Kim (2006) and Denessen et al. (2007) discuss the ways in which the values, needs, assets, and desires of immigrant parents and parents of color are often pushed aside in educational contexts in favor of dominant-group parents. Although these pieces examine international settings, their findings hold true in US contexts as well.

Another angle of this body of literature examines the potential benefits of involving marginalized parents in meaningful ways. Webster (2004) urges that parental engagement policy should be thought of as both a civil rights issue and a school reform strategy. The upholding of parent rights has the potential to foster more vibrant, inclusive, and successful school communities. Furthering this point, several scholars find that parents are more empowered and more involved when they know and understand their rights (Desimone et al., 2000; Fantuzzo et al., 2000; Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993). Epstein (2005) also points to the promise of authentic partnerships that can be supported through the engagement of parents at all levels of the educational process, including the formation of parental engagement policies.

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**Literature on Parent Roles in School Choice**

Given this backdrop of access and equity issues throughout the general practices of parental engagement, it is not surprising that the literature that specifically pertains to parent roles in school choice also raises important concerns about the equitable distribution of educational resources and opportunities through school choice.

As is the case with other subtopics on schools of choice, there is very little research on schools of choice as an important aspect of parental engagement. However, there are some authors who have addressed the broader issue of school choice as parental engagement (including other policies like vouchers, charters, and magnet schools), particularly in light of the rapid spread of school choice initiatives in the last thirty years. Much of that research focuses on evidence of improved educational outcomes for students (Pogodzinski et al., 2017). Other work focuses on connections between school choice participation and future parental engagement with receiving schools. For instance, Hausman & Goldring (2000) investigate if parents are more likely to be engaged with schools if they chose the schools that their children attend instead of being assigned to the school based on housing location.

However, other studies take a more critical approach to analyzing parental engagement through school choice. Wao et al. (2017) focus on the equity implications of widespread school choice policies, arguing that policies tend to be rooted in rational choice theory. They point out that parents cannot make rational choices (by proponents' standards) if they do not have the resources necessary to take advantage of the policy. The study also identifies several barriers that parents have to participating in school choice, which brings to life the realities that are presented by Michigan's schools of choice policy documents. Notions of rational choice may not align

with what marginalized parents know about school choice, what information to which they have access, or what abilities they have to navigate an often-complicated choice system.

Along with the proliferation of school choice has come the framing of parents as choosers. While parents have a great many choices to make when it comes to their children's education, the school that their children attend is one of the most impactful. As Baquedano-López et al. (2013) discuss in their literature review on equity issues in parental engagement, Debray-Pelot et al. (2007) identify two ideologies that drive parent choice-focused policy: neoconservativism and neoliberalism. Neoconservativism focuses on parent control and local control. In a set of related ideas, neoliberalism focuses on market-based strategies and limiting public, bureaucratic control. Both ideologies, when applied to practices such as school attendance and assignment, emphasize parents as individuals and consumers who should be freed to make decisions about their children's education.

Other authors question whether school choice is truly a choice at all for many parents, particularly marginalized parents. Baquedano-López et al. (2013) cite choice as yet another space in which parents are likely to be further marginalized in parental engagement activities. They note:

> As Dixson (2011) argues, 'choice' discourses primarily give parents of color a
> *forced* choice in that the mechanisms of choice create a hierarchical system of
> inequitable distribution that harms nondominant families when that choice does
> not contest neighborhood segregation, racialized tracking, or inequitable
> resource/opportunity provisions, and existing systems of power harmful to
> nondominant peoples (e.g., capitalism, nationalism, patriarchy, coloniality, or
> Eurocentric rationality (p. 156).

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Given the US Supreme Court ruling in Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1 (2007), policies are now greatly limited in the ability to directly address equity issues such as race in school assignment (Dixson, 2011). Within this colorblind legal and policy environment, delivering an equitable distribution of opportunities and resources is exceptionally challenging. Baquedano-López et al. (2013) argue that "It is in this way that the 'parent as chooser' notion is also based on and enacts a fundamentally colorblind discourse that constrains parents' involvement and neglects power relations" (p. 156).

## Study Design

### Methodology

This study is rooted in critical qualitative inquiry (Denzin, 2017) and more specifically leverages a critical document analysis design (Neuendorf, 2016) to deeply investigate the language of schools of choice policy in Michigan and illuminate important implications of that language for historically disadvantaged groups of parents. My work is bounded to this specific topic within a particular geographic context and the set of policy documents that influence the policy environment. Through an iterative process of reading related literature, developing my conceptual framework, and analyzing the literature, I make meaning of this policy environment and the place of policy documents within it.

While my work does follow well-established qualitative conventions (Maxwell, 2013), this work has a decidedly critical orientation in some key aspects. Firstly, my critical worldview examines power and challenges notions of objectivity and certainty (Diem et al., 2014). Secondly, I apply a critical conceptual framework that directly engages critical policy analysis approaches to analyzing my data and interpreting my findings. Further, I repeatedly consider my

place in the research as a person, a scholar, and an activist (Denzin, 2017) dedicated to the

advancement of social justice and equitable access to high-quality education for all students.

The following methodology matrix illustrates the connections among my research

questions, data sources, methodology, and trustworthiness strategies.

Table 14: *A Methodology Matrix for Investigating Parent Access to Schools of Choice Policy*

| What do I need to know? (research questions) | Why do I need to know this? (goals) | What kind of data will answer these questions? | Methodology | Trustworthiness Strategies |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Q1: What are the form and content of Michigan's schools of choice policy documents? | descriptive: learn about what these policies look like, how information is shared, what language is used | Section 105 and 105c; policy guidance doc produced by MDE | critical document analysis | positionality; public disclosure; audit trail; peer consultation |
| Q1: How does the language of Michigan's interdistrict school choice policies impact parent access to school choice opportunities? | descriptive: examine the form and content | Section 105 and 105c; policy guidance doc produced by MDE | critical document analysis | same |
| Q2: What barriers to access are embedded within the policies? What equity issues are presented by those barriers? | critical: examining context and the ways in which the policy may reproduce social inequities | Section 105 and 105c; policy guidance doc produced by MDE | critical document analysis | same |

**Data Sources & Analysis**

Sources for this study center on policy amendments to Michigan's State School Aid Act

of 1979. These include the state's policy for the transfer of students to a district within the same

ISD in which they reside, the policy governing the transfer of students to a contiguous ISD, and a

guidance document from the state entitled "Section 105/105C--Schools of Choice Definitions."

Section 105 contains twenty-one clauses and covers three pages. Section 105c contains twenty-

three clauses and covers three pages. The guidance document comprises four pages, two of

which are written in memo format and two of which contain a table with guidance for application

process deadlines. All of these documents are publicly available via a simple internet search or

the Michigan Department of Education website.

While the critical findings that I discuss later stemmed from a deductive-dominant approach, I used a constant comparison approach to my descriptive analysis of this same data (Maxwell, 2013). I used this descriptive analysis to assess the form and content of these policy documents. Through this iterative process, I worked through several steps of reading my document data and coding individual pieces of information, which generally meant individual policy clauses. I then interpreted those coded pieces of data and considered relationships among them. Further readings of the documents helped me further interpret, adjust, and confirm my coding scheme.

Critical analysis was conducted through deductive-dominant coding (Armat et al., 2018). This approach acknowledges that qualitative analysis rarely adheres strictly to deductive or inductive coding and instead embraces both my important preexisting understandings of these texts and the iterative nature of my analysis process. I used my conceptual framework as a starting point for analyzing the broad themes found within and across documents. I then observed themes that emerged from my data and considered how they were intertwined with my conceptual framework. Analysis was completed through an iterative process of reading literature and data, as is common in qualitative methodologies (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). As my final coding scheme emerged, I used my conceptual framework to make meaning of these themes and further contextualize them within the policy environment of this study.

**Trustworthiness**

In accordance with conventions of qualitative research practice, I take multiple steps toward supporting the trustworthiness of my project design, execution, analysis, and interpretation of my findings (Anfara et al., 2002; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2002). An important step toward transparency is my reflection on my positionality as a researcher. Discussion of my

positionality aligns with my critical worldview and informs readers of who I am in this work and how my identity influences my research process (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). As I have already discussed, my many social privileges and commitment to social justice drive me to critique educational policy and illuminate important challenges to educational access and equity in Michigan.

Triangulation is a prominent trustworthiness strategy in qualitative research. However, the small number of policy documents available, limiting the scope of my data. As I point out later, the expansion of this project to include other data forms, such as interviews with policymakers or educators who implement the policy, would be an advantageous expansion on this work. In order to account for my small collection of data, I use public disclosure (Anfara et al., 2002) and an audit trail (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Public disclosure, in my study, involves strategies like an in-depth discussion of my research procedures and multiple documentational tables. These tables include a methods-focused spreadsheet that displays direct connections among my research questions, data sources, and trustworthiness strategies as well as a code map that visualizes my coding process. This "show and tell" approach gives readers explicit information about my analysis of schools of choice documents and explains how I come to make my claims (Anfara et al., 2002). This approach is complemented by an audit trail (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I engaged in an extensive memoing and record keeping process throughout this study. Maintaining a detailed account of my decisions throughout the research process helps me account for my work and provide transparency in my data collection and analysis procedures (Maxwell, 2013).

I also use peer consultation in an effort to ensure that my study design is sound and appropriate for an investigation of my research questions. Consultation supports my analysis and

interpretations, and peers can weigh in on the soundness and reasonableness of my research claims (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Within this study, I have used peer consultation to shape my research questions, discuss appropriate data sources to investigate those questions, consider appropriate conceptualizations of the topic, formulate my research design, and build out my interpretations of my findings. Overall, these discussions have also helped me clarify my public disclosure of my research process as well. As a novice researcher, peer consultation has been an invaluable strategy to conceptualize, develop, and execute a sound study that makes important contributions.

## Descriptive Findings

Descriptive analysis of Michigan's schools of choice documents reveals several important themes that illuminate the access barriers that parents interested in school choice may face. These themes include information; process and logistics; explicit exclusion; and district gatekeeping. Although there are some areas of overlap among them, these themes do have some unique characteristics. The following diagram visualizes the categories and themes that emerged from my process. My categories are displayed at the bottom on the diagram, and at the next level up those categories are grouped into themes. All of these themes support a descriptive understanding of Michigan's schools of choice policy documents and address my first research question: What are the form and content of Michigan's schools of choice policy documents?

Figure 7: *Descriptive Code Map of Michigan's Schools of Choice Policy Documents*



**Descriptive Code Map: Michigan's Schools of Choice Policy Documents**

THEMES

| Information | Process & Logistics | Explicit Exclusion | District Gatekeeping |

CATEGORIES

Information:
- Timeline
- Modes of Dissemination
- Language Available
- Information Available

Process & Logistics:
- Sibling Enrollment
- Continuing Enrollment
- Transportation

Explicit Exclusion:
- Discipline Records
- Special Education

District Gatekeeping:
- Capacity Decisions
- Participation
- Information Dissemination

**Information**

For parents interested in taking advantage of schools of choice, one of the first barriers they may experience is gaining information about their options. While the policies state that districts must provide notice to the general public of the application process, there are no requirements for the nature of that notification, including how long the information should be available, how the information should be disseminated, or which languages are used to give notice. In fact, the policy guidance states that "published notice *may* precede the application period" (p. 1, emphasis added). This means that the timeframe during which parents can hear about open seats may be limited to the 15- to 30-day application window, without giving parents any notice beforehand. The only requirements regarding information involve availability: "The

district shall publish the grades, schools, and special programs, if any, for which enrollment may be available. . ." (Section 105.2.a, Section 105C.2.a) and the dates of the application timeline.

This freedom granted to districts about how they share information about annual participation has important implications for prospective parents. Given the prolific nature of smartphone and computer technology, districts may choose to only provide electronic notice and in very limited ways. However, parents with limited access to technology may never see such notices. Moreover, parents with limited English proficiency may never see information regarding schools of choice in a language that they understand.

Another stipulation in the policies could also impact parents' ability to take advantage of choice opportunities and involves processes of information sharing:

"If a district, or the nonresident applicant, requests the district in which a nonresident applicant resides to supply information needed by the district for evaluating the applicant's application for enrollment or for enrolling the applicant, the district of residence shall provide that information *on a timely basis"* (Section 105, clause 15; Section 105C, clause 15; emphasis added).

The vagueness of this timely basis stipulation could cause important complications for the student transfer process. Because sending districts have financial incentives to keep students from leaving, the lack of a specific timeframe may allow those districts to willfully run out the clock on providing necessary transfer paperwork.

Each of these information factors could act as a filtering mechanism and allow for better-connected parents to take advantage of choice opportunities. Parents cannot possibly weigh their choice options if they do not have information about those options in the first place.

**Process and Logistics**

For parents who *are* informed about district seat availability, there are certain provisions of the policy that have some positive aspects but may have underlying downsides. The policies state that "Districts shall give preference for enrollment. . . to other school-age children who reside in the same household" (Sec. 105, clause 12; Sec. 105c, clause 12). At face value, the requirement that districts give parents greater opportunity to enroll siblings in the same district is a step in the right direction. However, these rights to keep siblings in the same district are limited to where students live. By the wording of these clauses, siblings who do not live in the same households are not afforded the same preference. Moreover, there is no guarantee that parents will be able to enroll their other children in the future because districts are allowed to set open seats for each grade. There may not ultimately be open seats in the desired grade, and districts may choose to cease to participate in schools of choice altogether at any time.

Certain aspects impact families even after students have been accepted and enrolled. The policies make provisions for students who have already transferred into a district, saying:

> "A district shall continue to allow a pupil who was enrolled in and attended the district under this section in the school year or semester or trimester immediately preceding the school year or semester or trimester in question to enroll in the district until the pupil graduates from high school" (Section 105.11; Section 105C.11).

However, students who leave the district are not entitled to regain their seat if they wish to later return to the district. Cowen et al. (2015) and Pogodzinski et al. (2017) provide evidence that socioeconomically disadvantaged students are more likely to experience high mobility between schools over the course of their education. This disparity in the levels of schooling stability that

students experience can be an important factor that limits the educational options available to parents or at least make the logistics of accessing choice more complicated over time.

Another important logistical aspect presented by the policy regards transportation. Clause 17 in both Section 105 and 105C state, "This section does not require a district to provide transportation for a nonresident pupil enrolled in the district under this section or for a resident pupil enrolled in another district under this section." The policies only require that receiving districts provide parents with information about available transportation options. This transportation barrier introduces major access issues for many parents. Some parents may not have a car, while others may not be able to take time away from work obligations to drive their child to a more distant school. Further, many areas in Michigan (even urban ones) do not have reliable or extensive enough public transportation to get students to and from school in a safe and timely manner. Such transportation issues mean that many parents are unable to take advantage of schools of choice opportunities.

**Explicit Exclusion**

Several other stipulations in the policy can have a powerful influence on who has access to choice, and those parameters have racist and ableist implications. Firstly, the policies explicitly allow potential receiving districts to exclude students with particular kinds of discipline records, saying:

> A district may refuse to enroll a nonresident applicant if any of the following are met: (a) The applicant is, or has been within the preceding 2 years, suspended from another school. (b) The applicant, at any time before enrolling under this section, has been expelled from another school. (c) The applicant, at any time

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before enrolling under this section, has been convicted of a felony (Section 105.9;

Section 105C.9).

There is an extensive, well-established body of evidence that details the racist nature of school discipline disparities and criminal convictions among children in the United States (Okonofua et al., 2016). For example, nationwide, students of color of 3.2 times more likely than white students to be suspended from school (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018). Parents of students in such situations face exceptionally limited educational options for their children, and parents of color are more likely to experience those challenges.

Students with disabilities and special education students may be excluded from school choice as well as a result of administrative disagreements about who will pay for educational support services. Section 105c clause 19 states that:

In order for a district or intermediate district to enroll pursuant to this section a nonresident pupil who resides in a district located in a contiguous intermediate district and who is eligible for special education programs and services according to statute or rule, or who is a child with disabilities, as defined under the individuals with disabilities education act, Public Law 108-446, *the enrolling district shall have a written agreement with the resident district of the pupil for the purpose of providing the pupil with a free appropriate public education. The written agreement shall include, but is not limited to, an agreement on the responsibility for the payment of the added costs of special education programs and services for the pupil.* The written agreement shall address how the agreement shall be amended in the event of significant changes in the costs or level of

special education programs or services required by the pupil (pg. 3, emphasis

added).

Additionally, ISDs must also produce agreements regarding students who newly become

eligible for special education services or who move to a different ISD while remaining enrolled

in the same school. While it is reasonable that districts should have to come to an agreement

regarding payment for services, the language of the policy leaves the door open for enduring

disagreement and the ultimate denial of transfer if an agreement is not reached. Further, there is

no language in the policy about any kind of recourse a parent might have in advocating for the

transfer of their child. This limited access is especially distressing considering how parents of

students with special needs may stand to benefit the most from interdistrict transfer.

**District Gatekeeping**

In addition to the voluntary nature of participation, Michigan's policies give districts a

great deal of decision-making power in other potentially impactful ways. As mentioned earlier,

districts get to choose how they share information about their application process. A related point

is their ability to choose how many seats are open in each school, grade, and program. Districts

can choose whether to limit open seats to what they consider full capacity, or they can choose to

not cap the number of students they accept. Offering unlimited seats could allow a district to

syphon off massive numbers of students from other districts. However, offering just a few seats

could mean very few opportunities for parents who are seeking different educational options for

their children. Limiting the number of seats and the ways that information about them is shared

could mean that parents who are already well-connected or otherwise savvy may be the most

likely to be able to take advantage of choice.

# Critical Findings

While descriptive findings lend an important picture of the form and content of these policy documents, a critical analysis lends even greater insight into the many power dynamics at work in this data. Here, I directly apply my conceptual framework to analyze my data using a deductive-dominant coding approach (Armat et al., 2018). Findings reveal the ways in which already-advantaged parents are likely better-positioned to benefit from schools of choice policy, at the expense of marginalized parents. This figure illustrates my analytical process. I draw my themes from Diem & Young (2015) and my categories from parental engagement literature. Examples of data points are included at the bottom of the figure.

Figure 8: *Critical Code Map of Michigan's Schools of Choice Policy Documents*



Critical Code Map: Michigan's Schools of Choice Policy Documents

**THEMES**

| Rhetoric v Reality | Policy Context | Winners & Losers | Stratification | Resistance to Oppression |

**CATEGORIES**

| Rhetoric v Reality | Policy Context | Winners & Losers | Stratification | Resistance to Oppression |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Rhetoric of equity<br><br>*Reality of harm<br><br>*Parents as choosers<br><br>*Neoliberal ideology | *Oppression in schools and educational policy<br><br>*Segregation context<br><br>*High district participation<br><br>*Ignoring context of oppression | *Barriers to access for marginalized parents<br><br>*Introduction of interdistrict competition<br><br>*Complex financial pressures | *Benefits for already-advantaged parents<br><br>*Problematic policy language<br><br>*Reproduction of inequities<br><br>*Marginalization of transfer students | *Parents empowered by knowing their rights<br><br>*Challenging normative notions of achievement and success<br><br>*Tradition of parent activism |

**DATA**

| | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Despite equity rhetoric, many parents may not have access to the policy<br><br>*Urban districts decimated by competition, not revived by it | *Laws and policies segregated schools<br><br>*Policy passed for tax relief<br><br>*Policy tied to per-pupil funding | *Urban school "death spirals"<br><br>*Suburban schools get to try to fill to capacity<br><br>*Distribution of information only in English limits access | *Perpetuation of urban school struggles<br><br>*Opportunities are limited to those who can access them<br><br>*Districts can reject students with disciplinary records | *Urban parents choosing urban schools<br><br>*Protests against state intervention I<br><br>*Literacy for All lawsuit in Detroit |

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**Policy Rhetoric vs. Practiced Reality**

Table 15: *Concern Regarding the Difference between Policy Rhetoric and Practiced Reality*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| **1. Concern regarding the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality** | <ul><li>Claims of equity</li><li>Reality of harm</li><li>Parents as choosers</li><li>Neoliberal ideology</li></ul> | <ul><li>Despite equity rhetoric, many parents may not have access to the policy</li><li>Urban districts have been decimated by competition, not revived by it</li></ul> |

One of the most important factors to consider in the discussion of difference between school choice policy rhetoric and its practiced reality stems from problem definition. As Portz (1996) argues, the ways that policymakers define problems inevitably drives the solutions that policymakers devise. In the case of Michigan's schools of choice policy, state-level proponents like former Gov. Engler, Dick and Betsy DeVos, and Republicans in the state legislature argued that the problem facing the state's families was the restriction on where students were allowed to attend school. Attendance was bounded by where students lived. As the argument went, parents, on principle, deserved to choose which public schools their children attended. On similar ideological grounds, many argued that disadvantaged students such as students of color and students living in poverty deserved the same opportunities to freely choose schools as their more affluent peers. Greater financial and social resources allowed more advantaged parents to move to the school districts they desired, and policy should change in order to allow all students the same choice opportunities.

Perhaps if choice proponents had defined these educational equity problems differently, they would have preemptively recognized the potential dire implications for equity that are embedded in Michigan's policy. Parents' ability to transfer students was prioritized over

focusing on the need to make every single school in the state a well-resourced and thriving one. The enrollment and subsequent financial impacts of school choice on urban public schools is well-documented (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012; Pogodzinski et al., 2018). These outcomes are in stark contrast to arguments made by schools of choice advocates, who claimed that the competition stemming from choice would drive improvements in districts that lose students.

This policy rhetoric has important consequences for individual parents as well. As Baquedano-López et al. (2013) argue, this neoliberal and neoconservative rhetoric frames parents as choosers. Parents are expected to be savvy, well-informed consumers. Just as importantly, responsibility for providing a high-quality education to students is shifted from public institutions onto private individuals. Parents are charged with finding the best choice for their students. If the school students attend is not providing the education that parents desire, the responsibility falls to parents to find a more desirable option.

**Policy Context**

Table 16: *Concern Regarding the Policy, Its Roots, and Its Development (Context)*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| **2. Concern regarding the policy, its roots, and its development (context)** | • Historical and contemporary context of oppression in schools and educational policy<br>• Segregation context<br>• High district participation<br>• Ignoring context of oppression | • Laws and policies segregated neighborhoods and schools<br>• Policy was passed in light of financial concerns with tax structure<br>• Schools of choice tied to per-pupil funding |

When considering the context of this policy, it is important to remember that it has its roots in partisan politics. School choice broadly and schools of choice in particular are part of a specific political agenda that advanced neoliberal ideas and attempted to dismantle public

institutions. Michigan's schools of choice policy came at a moment of massive consolidation of political power in the hands of Republican policymakers. Although proponents of the policy claimed that it was for the benefit of students and parents, there is little evidence to suggest that this policy aligned with the desires of parents, especially marginalized parents. Neighborhood schooling continues to serve more families than any other form of governance or educational choice, so we must question whether schools of choice truly serves the will of Michigan voters and families.

We should also consider the historical backdrop of schools of choice in Michigan. Like many states across the country, Michigan has been the center of much racial segregation litigation in many municipalities and metropolitan regions, including but not limited to Detroit, Grand Rapids, Benton Harbor, Lansing, and Kalamazoo. Many districts were also the sites of racial segregation investigations by entities like the then-U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and the State Board of Education in Michigan (Baugh, 2006) in the 1960s and 1970s. Through these investigations and lawsuits, plaintiffs repeatedly claimed that urban school districts were purposely segregating students, faculty, and staff on the basis of race and that suburban school districts were purposely keeping students of color out. While findings varied, many districts were found liable, and those who were not displayed patterns of policy that by today's standards of evaluation are seen by scholars as purposeful and wanton (Orfield, 2013). Districts commonly fought tooth and nail to keep students of color out of their own children's districts and schools. Important, these injustices were inextricably linked to segregationist housing policies that kept families of color, even when they had the means and desire, from moving to better-resourced school districts (Rothstein, 2018). Many efforts to ameliorate the

devastating effects of years of school segregation were dismantled by the *Milliken v. Bradley* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1974.

This historical context is important when considering the contemporary realities of schools of choice. District participation has risen precipitously over the last twenty years, reaching levels of around 90% of districts (Pogodzinski et al., 2018). This is especially remarkable in many of the very districts that fought so hard to keep students of color out. In metropolitan areas across the state, many districts that have chosen to accept transfer students through schools of choice now have large proportions of their student populations made up of those transfer students. Ten percent total transfer students is common, with many districts' transfer proportions reaching above twenty percent (Pogodzinski et al., 2018). This trend should come as no surprise given the financial constraints that many districts are facing and a common disregard for the damaging effects on districts that consistently deal with a net loss of students through schools of choice. Districts across Michigan have experienced major financial impacts in the past two decades, including emigration from the state, declining birth rates, and cuts in funding from the state legislature.

Acknowledgement of this history of oppressive policy is notably left out of the conversation about schools of choice. Racial segregation and the receivement gap (Venzant Chambers, 2009) are direct results of unequal and inequitable educational and housing policies. Instead of addressing these injustices, schools of choice policy bypasses that responsibility and instead grants opportunities for more and (sometimes) better opportunities to a scant few students. As a result, those students of color and students living in poverty who remain in underserved schools feel an even greater burden than they did before. Further, urban districts that lose students tend to become even more racially isolated (Thelen et al., 2019).

**Creation of Winners & Losers**

Table 17: *Concern with the Distribution of Power, Resources, and Knowledge as well as the Creation of Policy "Winners" and "Losers"*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| **3. Concern with the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge as well as the creation of policy "winners" and "losers"** | • Barriers to access for marginalized parents<br>• Introduction of interdistrict competition<br>• Complex financial pressures | • Urban schools lose massive financial resources: "death spirals"<br>• Suburban schools get to try to fill to capacity<br>• Distribution of information only in English limits access |

Parent access to Michigan's schools of choice policy is defined by an intricate, complex interplay between power, resources, and information. While parent-specific factors are deeply important, I begin by discussing the trickle-down impacts of the policy through consequences of funding streams for districts. Within the broad choice system in Michigan, a major power influence is the direct ties between schools of choice and per pupil funding. This is evidenced by Ohio's initial experimentation with schools of choice. That state's policy was enacted in the late 1980s, but it did not include a reform of the existing statewide school funding structure. At that time, school funding in Ohio was still heavily based on property taxes, which allowed municipalities great leeway to determine the tax effort that they were willing to contribute to schools. As a result, Ohio had a huge disparity in funding among districts across the state. This disparity was deeply influential in district decisions to participate in schools of choice. While sending districts were required to allow students to leave if they found a district that agreed to enroll them, sending districts were only required to contribute the total of the student's per pupil allotment in that district. Therefore, districts that were currently operating at a higher cost per

pupil could reject the student on the basis of funding or require that parents make up the difference. Because of these financial issues, many districts declined to participate or did so in a very limited fashion (Fowler, 1996).

However, the architects of Michigan's schools of choice policy made the savvy move of allowing funding to transfer with students. The result has been increasing district participation statewide, reaching a high of around 90% district participation (Pogodzinski et al., 2018). This comes as no surprise, as numerous districts of all sizes and locations have faced increasing financial pressures due to factors such as movement out of the state, declining birthrates, and declining value in funding from the state. Importantly, the rules of this policy have left some districts much better equipped to draw in transfer students. The impact on urban districts has been particularly devastating, as already under-resourced districts have been unable to compete with suburban districts. Parents who have had the means and desire have left urban districts by the thousands since implementation of schools of choice policy.

At the same time, schools of choice policy documents reveal many impactful barriers for parents who wish to use the policy. As I have discussed before, some of these barriers include student transportation to school and access to information about the policy. Also important is the discipline provisions in the policy that permit exclusion of students with discipline and criminal records. A large body of research identifies widespread disproportionate application of discipline along racial lines. Students of color are much more likely to be suspended and expelled and more likely to be convicted of a felony (Okonofua et al., 2016), meaning that students of color are more likely to be barred from transferring to new districts. These implicit and explicit parameters for exclusion mean that students and parents who supposedly were the most likely to gain from this policy are actually the most likely to be left out.

**Reproduction of Social Stratification**

Table 18: *Concern Regarding Stratification and the Broader Effect a Given Policy Has on*

*Relationships of Inequality and Privilege*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| **4. Concern regarding stratification and the broader effect a given policy has on relationships of inequality and privilege** | • Policy tends to benefit already-advantaged parents<br>• Problematic policy language<br>• Reproduction and potential worsening of inequalities and inequities through policy<br>• Further marginalization of students who transfer | • Struggles facing urban schools become more concentrated<br>• Opportunities are limited to those who can access them, and even then there may not be enough to go around<br>• MI's choice policy allows districts to reject students with disciplinary records |

As with so many other educational policies, Michigan's schools of choice policy is likely

to reproduce and even worsen inequalities and inequities. A close examination of the language

used--and not used--within the policy documents is indicative of the damaging implications.

These documents are highly technicist in nature, with a focus on rules of participation and the

guise of neutrality. However, these documents are far from neutral. Several important realities

are omitted from these policies. First, the documents do not name or discuss any social identity

groups. This is despite proponents' claims that they wished to help marginalized parents access

educational opportunities. Second, the documents do not discuss the intents of the policy to

address equity concerns. Third, they do not mention the historical role of policymakers of

purposely developing, implementing, and protecting an inherently unjust educational system that

marginalizes some parents and perpetuates advantages for others. While the architects of schools

of choice policy argued that all children deserved better educational opportunities, they ignore

the fact that state lawmakers and educational leaders in privileged districts are directly

responsible for the creation of the very system that they were encouraging parents to opt out of.

This is the very type of silence and imprecise language that scholars warn perpetuates injustices within the educational system (Crozier, 2001; Pollack, 2008).

Instead of directly addressing the equity realities within the educational system, the focus of this policy has been on creating an educational market and promoting a neoliberal policy agenda. This means that every single district makes decisions about whether to participate in schools of choice, introducing competitive factors that public schools were not designed to address and engage with. The state's laissez faire approach to these educational markets has created an environment of winners and losers, much like the realities within the business world. Centralized oversight is an important trade-off in order to protect the rights of marginalized people (Kirst & Wirt, 2009), but the state of Michigan plays a very minimal role in regulating the participation of districts in schools of choice. While the policy documents do include oversight language and penalties for districts that do not comply, the state has minimal resources--and perhaps minimal interest--in enforcing those stipulations.

As I have discussed, this relatively new market model has had devastating consequences for many districts, particularly urban ones. Parents and their children who are, for whatever reason, left out of choice policy face the consequences of sharply decreased funding for their schools in the wake of precipitous student transfers out of their home districts. Those who are left behind face many difficulties such as inadequate resources and opportunities in facilities, learning materials, and educational personnel; decreased morale of educators and the school community; and potential social judgement of parents who stay in their home districts, who may be cast as making the wrong or irresponsible choice.

However, parents and their children who do transfer can face difficulties as well. As Venzant Chambers & Huggins (2014) investigate, students of color often deal with racial

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opportunity cost when attending predominantly white institutions. These negative consequences can include disproportionate discipline and tracking rates; overt discrimination like bullying and bias; threats to the safety of marginalized students; lack of culturally relevant and sustaining curriculum; lack of educators from similar backgrounds; and much more. Students who transfer into predominantly white districts may find themselves in just such a position. Parents and educators in receiving districts often respond with racially coded language to the presence of students of color who transfer. Sidestepping overtly racist arguments, people lean toward more veiled but still highly problematic arguments against inclusion, pointing to concepts like safety, educational quality, and overcrowding of schools. In a related vein, Cowen et al. (2015) find that students who transfer are more likely to do so more than once, suggesting that those students experience more instability in the educational paths. While some parents and students may have overall positive experiences when they transfer, the dynamics mentioned here point to the logistical, social, and emotional difficulties that schools of choice policy presents for marginalized people, even for those who are able to participate. Some parents are taking advantage of the policy, but that does not mean that they are getting the support that they need.

**Resistance to Oppression**

Table 19: *Concern Regarding the Nature of Resistance to or Engagement in Policy by Members of Non-Dominant Groups*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| **5. Concern regarding the nature of resistance to or engagement in policy by members of non-dominant groups** | <ul><li>Parents empowered by knowing their policy rights</li><li>Challenging normative notions of achievement and success</li><li>Tradition of parent activism</li></ul> | <ul><li>Urban parents choosing urban schools</li><li>Protests against state intervention like Benton Harbor, naming choice policy as the source of struggles</li><li>Literacy for All lawsuit in Detroit</li></ul> |

As is consistent with their long history of fighting for equitable education for their children, marginalized parents in Michigan have taken an active approach to combating the devastating impacts of schools of choice policy. For instance, many parents have made affirmative, public choices to send their children to urban public schools in their own neighborhoods, even when transferring was a viable option. This commitment to urban education systems means a reinvestment of resources by parents and the opportunity for parents and educators to build partnerships in support of students. At the same time, we must acknowledge that some parents have indeed taken advantage of schools of choice policy. Work by Howard & Reynolds (2008) and Kim (2006) shows that parents who know and understand their rights are more likely to be engaged with schools, and the participation of some marginalized parents in schools of choice seems to be indicative of that dynamic.

More specific activist initiatives have emerged across the state. A notable example is the recent fight to save Benton Harbor High School from closure. Benton Harbor Area Schools, a public school district in Southwest Michigan that predominantly serves Black students, was targeted by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer in March 2019. Citing persistently low test scores and graduation rates, the governor's office announced a plan to close the high school and turn the district into a K-8 district. Community pushback was swift and vocal, with parents and community leaders pointing to state policy, including schools of choice, as the root of the district's academic and financial struggles. Indeed, the district had lost over sixty percent of its student population over the last fifteen years as a result of factors like schools of choice and charter schools. The message from parents was clear: they were unwilling to accept even more state intervention when state policies like schools of choice had already hurt the district so badly.

The governor's office later withdrew its plan, opting for an inclusive exploratory committee to investigate possibilities for supporting the district and its schools.

In a similar parent-led stand for education, the *Gary B. et al. v. Whitmer et al.,* (2020)—more commonly known as the "Literacy for All" lawsuit—has captured the attention of many throughout the state and across the country. The suit alleges that the state of Michigan is liable for years of disinvestment from Detroit public schools and the passage of policies that have devastated the financial and operational health of the city's education system. The focus of the plaintiff's claim is that the state has a constitutional mandate to provide an adequate education, including the teaching of children to read. Parents have argued that the state has been negligent in its responsibility and denied its role in producing this inherently inequitable environment. This suit is an instrumental example of how state policies like schools of choice are intimately interwoven with a long history of discriminatory educational policy and practice. However, it is also an important instance of an equally long history of marginalized parents fighting for their children's education.

**Discussion**

All of these many and varied access and equity issues raise the question, "For whom was this policy designed?" If schools of choice policy is truly about equity, then access to it should have been the first consideration on the minds of those who created it. It is reasonable to assume that this policy was just a matter of interest convergence for some policy makers (Bell, 1980). It represented a convenient opportunity to introduce a neoliberal, market-based agenda into public education. Along with the policy came opportunities for mostly white, economically advantaged suburban districts to make large sums of money as students transferred into their districts from

urban ones. And those policymakers who truly wanted to advance equity should have focused on promoting access to more educational opportunities for the families who need them the most.

We must directly name and address the forces of oppression at work in educational policy, including schools of choice. Dynamics of racism, classism, ablism, nationalism, and xenophobia are deeply imbedded within this policy. Future attempts at expanding educational opportunities must take into account this context of oppression *and* involve the stakeholders that such policies aim to serve.

Part of this naming of oppression is recognizing the damage done to schools in urban centers. Choice issues like these are not only about access to seats in other districts. They are about access to high-quality education. Urban districts have seen precipitous declines in resources and enrollments since the mid-20th century (Orfield, 2013). Further, Michigan's focus on breaking down traditional district boundaries has triggered massive disinvestment from urban education since these policies were passed in the 1990s. This diversion of resources through schools of choice further privileges already advantaged districts (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012) and follows a historical pattern of diversion of investment from urban institutions like schools into suburban ones (Kruse & Segrue, 2006).

For parents living within decimated districts, school choice might not be much of a choice at all. As evidenced by the widespread use of schools of choice--with the greatest number of choosers leaving urban districts for suburban ones--parents are using this policy to send their children to better-resourced districts. The rationale for such choices are clear. Proponents of schools of choice claimed that parents would be able to find the best fit for their students. Instead, parents are understandably choosing to leave struggling schools that are understaffed,

underfunded, and, in so many cases, literally crumbling. And the more parents leave, the more dire the situation for the students and parents left behind.

Despite these stark realities, Michigan's schools of choice policy is going nowhere anytime soon. This choice structure is now baked into the system, with school districts across the state making major enrollment-based decisions as a result of these competitive pressures. Such responses include steps such as new building construction (e.g. East Lansing Public Schools); large-scale restructuring of schools and programs (e.g. Grand Rapids Public Schools); and the formation of collaborative choice agreements within ISDs (e.g. Kent ISD). Policymakers, researchers, and educators alike should consider the consequences for the countless children who will never have the opportunity to use school choice. How do we improve educational quality for those children and offer them the education they deserve?

## Limitations & Future Research

This study has important implications for our understanding of how schools of choice policy influences access to public school districts in Michigan. During a time when choice policy ideas are more and more prominent in national debates, an understanding of the consequences of schools of choice policy is vital. Further, this research could help district educational practitioners make choices about policy implementation that have the best potential to support goals of educational equity. As with any research, however, this study has some important limitations to consider. Because Michigan has a limited number of schools of choice policy documents available at the state level, the collection of data sources in this study is relatively small. Therefore, this study would be bolstered by an investigation of other types of sources on this topic, such as an analysis of statements from state policymakers who held office during the passage of this policy. This work is also limited by its focus on a single form of school choice.

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Given the broader landscape of school choice and the important influence of charter schools on student enrollment in Michigan, further investigation into related access and equity issues would be valuable as well.

Other promising avenues for future work relating to this study include investigating the practices and conceptualizations of district leaders who participate in schools of choice and examining the experiences of parents who have transferred their students to suburban districts. Additionally, examining the schools of choice policies in other states would lend insight into the broader context of school choice policy in the U.S.

APPENDIX

**APPENDIX C**


**Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies: A Conceptual Framework**

The following table illustrates the connections across the CPA literature, the critical

parental engagement literature, and the data. Analysis provides an understanding of how these

concepts manifest in policy documents.

Table 20: *Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies: A Conceptual Framework*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| **1. Concern regarding the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality** | <ul><li>Rhetoric of equity</li><li>Reality of harm</li><li>Parents as choosers</li><li>Neoliberal ideology</li></ul> | <ul><li>Despite equity rhetoric, many parents may not have access to the policy</li><li>Urban districts have been decimated by competition, not revived by it</li></ul> |
| **2. Concern regarding the policy, its roots, and its development (context)** | <ul><li>Historical and contemporary context of oppression in schools and educational policy</li><li>Segregation context</li><li>High district participation</li><li>Ignoring context of oppression</li></ul> | <ul><li>Laws and policies segregated neighborhoods and schools</li><li>Policy was passed in light of financial concerns with tax structure</li><li>Schools of choice tied to per-pupil funding</li></ul> |
| **3. Concern with the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge as well as the creation of policy "winners" and "losers"** | <ul><li>Barriers to access for marginalized parents</li><li>Introduction of interdistrict competition</li><li>Complex financial pressures</li></ul> | <ul><li>Urban schools lose massive financial resources: "death spirals"</li><li>Suburban schools get to try to fill to capacity</li><li>Distribution of information only in English limits access</li></ul> |
| **4. Concern regarding stratification and the broader effect a given policy has on relationships of inequality and privilege** | <ul><li>Policy tends to benefit already-advantaged parents</li><li>Problematic policy language</li><li>Reproduction and potential worsening of inequalities and inequities through policy</li><li>Further marginalization of students who transfer</li></ul> | <ul><li>Struggles facing urban schools become more concentrated</li><li>Opportunities are limited to those who can access them, and even then there may not be enough to go around</li><li>MI's choice policy allows districts to reject students with disciplinary records</li></ul> |
| **5. Concern regarding the nature of resistance to or engagement in policy by members of non-dominant groups** | <ul><li>Parents empowered by knowing their policy rights</li><li>Challenging normative notions of achievement and success</li><li>Tradition of parent activism</li></ul> | <ul><li>Urban parents choosing urban schools</li><li>Protests against state intervention like Benton Harbor, naming choice policy as the source of struggles</li><li>Literacy for All lawsuit in Detroit</li></ul> |

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**PAPER III: DISTRICT ROLES, PARENT ACCESS, AND EQUITY IN A REGIONAL COLLABORATIVE SCHOOL CHOICE AGREEMENT IN MICHIGAN**

## Introduction, Motivation, & Research Questions

Michigan's interdistrict student transfer policy, better known in the state as schools of choice, has had widespread impacts on student enrollment patterns across the state over the last twenty-five years (Pogodzinski et al, 2018; Thelen et al., 2020). Since the implementation of Section 105 of the State School Aid Act of 1996 (The State School Aid Act of 1979), hundreds of thousands of students have participated and about 90% of school districts choose to receive nonresident students (Pogodzinski et al., 2018). This policy allows students within an intermediate school district (ISD)[8] to transfer to a district in the same ISD but other than the district in which the student lives, so long as the receiving district has space and chooses to accept students. Importantly, per-pupil funding from the state transfers with students to their new districts. Under that same law, districts within the same ISD can enter into cooperative agreements with each other to coordinate schools of choice processes such as applications and information dissemination to parents. "Local school districts may also participate in cooperative education programs with other local or intermediate school districts that permit them to enroll and count each other's resident students. The requirements of Sections 105 and 105c do not govern cooperative education programs" (Michigan Department of Education, 2013).

Kent County ISD, home to the Grand Rapids metropolitan area and the largest educational market in West Michigan, began such an agreement at the very inception of the state's schools of choice law. Since then, the Kent Intermediate Superintendents Association

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[8] In Michigan, ISDs are educational support agencies with jurisdictions that cover one or more counties. They provide financial, logistical, and capacity support to school districts and directly administer some services in some areas.

Collaborative Schools of Choice Program (hereafter Kent Choice Program)[9] has facilitated the

transfers of thousands of students throughout the ISD, amounting to around fourteen percent of

the ISD's student population in 2016 (Scott, 2016). All twenty districts within the ISD participate

annually. Each district reports the number of seats they make available, and the ISD shares that

information with the public. The Kent Choice Program also offers a single application form that

parents may return to the desired district. Further, all districts agree to the same annual timeline

for their application processes. As with any other schools of choice program in Michigan,

districts that receive more applications than open slots must hold a lottery for admittance.

However, parents who apply through the Kent Choice Program may list up to three desired

districts, ranked in order of preference. If students do not gain admittance to their first choice,

parents can choose to be put on a waiting list or have their application forwarded to their second

choice, and so on.

This study has two intertwining avenues of investigation. Firstly, this program raises

important access and equity considerations for parents in Kent ISD who wish to send their

children to a school district outside the one in which they live. While the plan may mitigate some

access barriers, it may, like other school choice policies, further stratify parents along lines of

privilege (Baquedano-López et al., 2013, Calabrese Barton et al., 2004). Using a conceptual

framework that marries a critical policy analysis (CPA) approach with concepts from critical

parental engagement literature, this project explores the potential impacts of the Kent Choice

Program on parent access to schooling for their children.

Secondly, this study investigates the Kent Choice Program as an example of a regional

response to Michigan's schools of choice policy and schooling options for parents. While this

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[9] Some documents identify what I call the Kent Choice Program as the Kent ISD Collaborative Schools of Choice Program, while other documents use the term plan instead of program.

plan shapes how districts cooperate with each other, it shapes how they compete with each other for parents and students as well. Some important research exists on the impact of regional cooperative enrollment agreements in some parts of the U.S. (see Finnigan & Scarbrough, 2013; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Holme et al., 2013; Holme & Richards, 2011), but this avenue of research is unexplored for Michigan and its schools of choice law. More specifically, not enough is known about how districts work both individually and collectively to offer options that parents desire. This study lends insights into how districts are responding to the law, how they make decisions about participation in choice, and how ISDs oversee and shape participation in choice. I also consider the Covid-19 pandemic as a complicating factor in the 2020-21 cycle for districts and parents participating in the application process. In the words of López(2020), "The Covid-19 pandemic is not creating inequities but exposing them." An examination of the Kent Choice Program's response to the global pandemic illustrates important examples of how inequities in schools of choice participation may be getting worse.

Taken together, my investigation highlights an important nexus between the supply side and demand side of schools of choice. Districts and Kent ISD choose what they are willing to offer parents, and this study provides a critical perspective on the equity and access issues that may affect parents' abilities to use schools of choice policy. My analysis provides a way of understanding how the Kent Choice Program may mitigate some inequities but also perpetuate others and further disadvantage marginalized parents.

Data sources include Kent ISD documents detailing the program; schools of choice websites from the twenty participating districts; and newspaper archives about the development, history, and current state of the program. My investigation is driven by the following preliminary research questions:

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1. What is the form and content of policy documents about the Kent Choice Program?

2. What do policy and archival documents reveal about the nature of this agreement and the context behind it?

3. What are the potential parent access and equity implications embedded with the Kent Choice Program's informational and guiding documents?

## Policy Background

A thorough discussion of a policy's historical and contemporary context is an important component of the CPA approach (Diem et al., 2014). In keeping with this conceptual and analytical paradigm, I provide here a detailed account of the development of the Kent Choice Program, as well as the current status of the policy.

Kent ISD is home to twenty public school districts, including Byron Center, Caledonia, Cedar Springs, Comstock Park, East Grand Rapids, Forest Hills, Godfrey Lee, Godwin Heights, Grandville, Grand Rapids, Kelloggsville, Kenowa Hills, Kentwood, Kent City, Lowell, Northview, Rockford, Sparta, Thornapple Kellogg, and Wyoming. The organization serves more than 300 schools and more than 117,000 students (Kent Intermediate School District, 2020b). The map below illustrates the location of each member district (Kent Intermediate School District, 2020a).

Figure 9: *Kent ISD Member Districts*
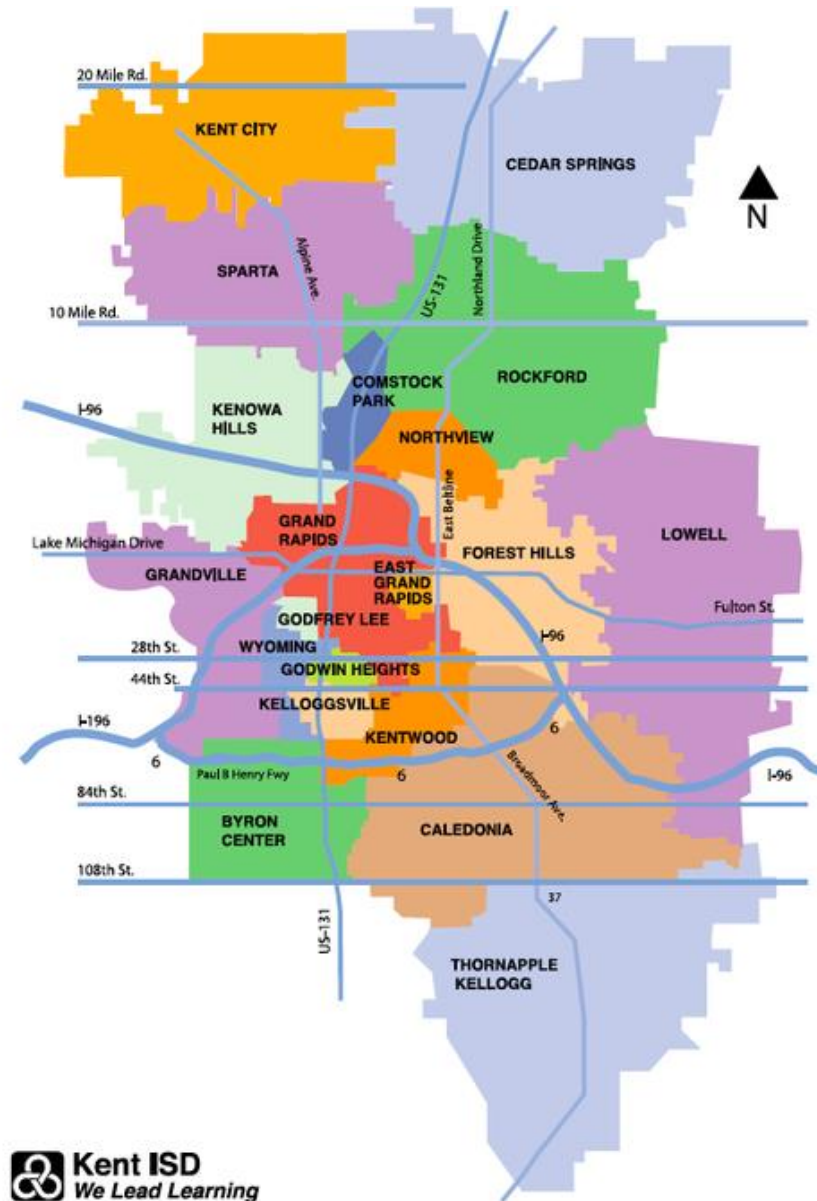


Before discussing the historical details of the policy itself, it is important to understand

the legal context within this region. As in so many other metropolitan regions across Michigan

and the US, the Grand Rapids area was the subject of a segregation case in the late 1960s and

early 1970s. In the class action suit *Higgins et al. v. Board of Education of Grand Rapids,*

*Michigan et al.* (1973), several local parents alleged that the district was purposely segregating

schools within the districts through both student and staff assignment. Further, eleven

surrounding districts were named as co-defendants, including Comstock Park, East Grand

Rapids, Forest Hills, Godfrey Lee, Godwin Heights, Grandville, Kenowa, Kentwood, Northview,

Rockford, Wyoming. Plaintiffs argued that those suburban districts were engaging in

manipulation of boundary lines to segregate their own districts and keep Black students out. US

District Judge Engel ruled that GRPS was segregating their teacher force and must remedy that.

Otherwise, the defendants won the case. While this case does not have direct policy bearing on

the Kent Choice Program, this history elucidates the racial politics in the area. While the

plaintiffs did not win their case, it indicates that many were deeply troubled by the segregation

consequences of the decisions of educational leaders at the time. Within a few decades, several

of the districts named in the suit were freely accepting students of color, along with their per-

pupil foundation funding.

From the passage of Michigan's initial schools of choice law in 1996, Kent ISD took

steps to directly shape how districts within this jurisdiction would participate in the policy.[10] In

those early days, Kent ISD's superintendent George Woons made explicit his priorities to protect

GRPS from the potentially devastating effects of the loss of students and funding. His approach,

as agreed to by all twenty districts in the ISD, was to craft a pilot program that would guide the

participation of all districts. This sort of pilot program was allowed under state supervision at the

time and gave organizing agencies time for some trial and error in order to determine their most

desirable arrangement for schools of choice participation. Initially, the Kent Choice Program

carried two caps: a 1% cap on the percentage of a district's student population who could leave a

district, and a 1% cap on the percentage of a district's student population that a receiving district

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[10] Schools of Choice in Michigan is also governed by Section 105c of the State School Aid Act, which allows for transfer of students to a contiguous ISD. Section 105c does not have any official bearing on the Kent Choice Program. Districts may choose independently to participate in Section 105c schools of choice, and many do.

could accept. As a result, student transfers between districts remained relatively low, especially as compared to other metropolitan areas in the state.

After about four years of this pilot program, however, Kent ISD began drawing criticism from some lawmakers and school choice advocates. Critics argued that the Kent Choice Program was not consistent with the letter of Michigan's schools of choice law and went against the spirit of the law as well. The law was intended to expand school choice and promote competition, they said, not protect urban districts. The Grand Rapids Press editorial board were among the most vocal dissenters. They argued, among other things, that GRPS did not need protecting and that competition would generate improvement across districts. In 2001, after five years of the pilot program and its caps, the Kent Choice Program lifted its caps entirely. Districts were able to make as many seats available as they wanted. Only Byron Center continued to opt out of accepting new students.

In the 2002-03 school year, KISD districts again agreed to implement a cap, this time at 2% of a receiving district's population but no cap on how many students could leave a district. However, that cap was soon removed, and to this day districts are allowed to accept as many students as they say they have room for. This opening of doors has led to numerous conflicts and tensions among district priorities and fluctuating enrollments. In addition to competition from charter schools and overall declining state population, student enrollment numbers have declined precipitously in GRPS due to schools of choice student transfers to neighboring districts.

Open seats within the Kent Choice Program have grown massively, from 435 in 2000-01 to a peak of 4333 in the 2015-16 school year. During the 2020-21 school year, districts have made a total of 3785 available. Although many seats go unfilled, we know that many students are indeed on the move. This scale of movement is consistent with the literature on schools of choice

participation across Michigan in recent years (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012; Cowen et al., 2015; Thelen et al., 2020).

Given the freedom of Kent ISD districts to make available as many seats as they find appropriate, districts clearly take different approaches to determining seat availability. While the state schools of choice law says that districts must make information available about both open seats district-wide *and* per grade, very few districts actually do this. Moreover, many districts determine to make very specific seat numbers available, while others offer a lump number year after year. For instance, Caledonia made 261 seats available for the 2019-2020 school year, while Grand Rapids has made 500 available in that year and many years prior (Scott, 2019). Superintendents discuss in newspaper sources that districts each go through their own analysis process for seat availability. As I discuss later, budgetary and enrollment concerns are often a major factor in decision making.

These data about the use of choice participation by parents and the districts that serve them raises important qualitative questions. We need a better understanding of how the program operates within Kent ISD; how the competition and cooperation regulated by the policy impacts what districts offer to parents; and what factors may influence the abilities of different groups of parents to use Michigan's schools of choice policy through the Kent Choice Program.

### Conceptual Framework: Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies

The conceptual framework that I have developed for this study draws on CPA and the critical parental engagement literature in order to analyze the power dynamics at work when parents engage with educational institutions through schools of choice. Specifically, I leverage Diem & Young's (2015) "5 Critical Concerns," which reflect their investigations into existing work that employs CPA and the research priorities of scholars in this area of study. CPA

emphasizes several important ideas that are common across critical worldview approaches to research. Some of these ideas include the interrogation of power structures in society; the rejection of the positivist paradigm and the questioning of objective truth and knowledge; the examination of the role of researcher positionality; and the embrace of the messiness of research analysis, findings, and conclusions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin, 2017; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Maxwell, 2013).

CPA in educational research brings all of these ideas to inquiry that specifically focuses on educational policy. As Diem & Young (2015) argue, CPA scholars focus their research on five critical concerns. These include:

(1) concern regarding the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality;

(2) concern regarding the policy, its roots, and its development (e.g., how it emerged, what problems it was intended to solve, how it changed and developed over time, and its role in reinforcing the dominant culture);

(3) concern with the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge as well as the creation of policy "winners" and "losers;"

(4) concern regarding social stratification and the broader effect a given policy has on relationships of inequality and privilege; and

(5) concern regarding the nature of resistance to or engagement in policy by members of non-dominant groups (Diem et al., 2014).

As a research approach that is still developing, CPA does not yet have a set of highly-defined tenets. However, I argue that these critical concerns provide a foundation for the CPA approach and a set of basic understandings about the nature of educational policy and its role in

educational systems. The theoretical and conceptual underpinnings with CPA are clear and well-documented (Diem et al., 2014). As such, I leverage these concerns to drive my analysis.

In order to strengthen and deepen my conceptualization of the Kent Choice Program, I also draw on vital conceptual contributions from the critical parental engagement literature. While CPA provides a more general perspective on educational policy, the critical parental engagement literature provides topical depth to more specifically analyze the Kent Choice Program as a parental engagement policy. Michigan's schools of choice policy has changed how school district boundaries function and, in some cases, altered the possibilities for where parents can send their children to school (Plank & Sykes, 2000; Pogodzinski, 2017). The policy is also opening new interactions between parents and educational institutions, as parents seeking to transfer their children interact with districts looking to accept new students (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). However, this body of literature also opens avenues for understanding how the same patterns that are seen across parental engagement dynamics are likely to translate to schools of choice participation. The Kent Choice Program is no exception.

The combination of the five critical concerns and dynamics from the parental engagement literature offer essential tools to critically analyze the implications of parents choosing schools. More specifically, my framework allows me to consider critically the phenomenon of districts cooperating in their schools of choice participation. Further, this framework helps me analyze the potential meanings of district participation in school choice and the implications for parents.

Combining these concepts into a coherent and salient set of ideas, I refer to this conceptual framework as *critical parental engagement policy studies.* The diagram below

illustrates this conceptual framework, with Diem & Young's (2015) five critical concerns in the

top level and concepts from the parental engagement literature in the level below.[11]

Figure 10: *Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies: A Conceptual Framework*
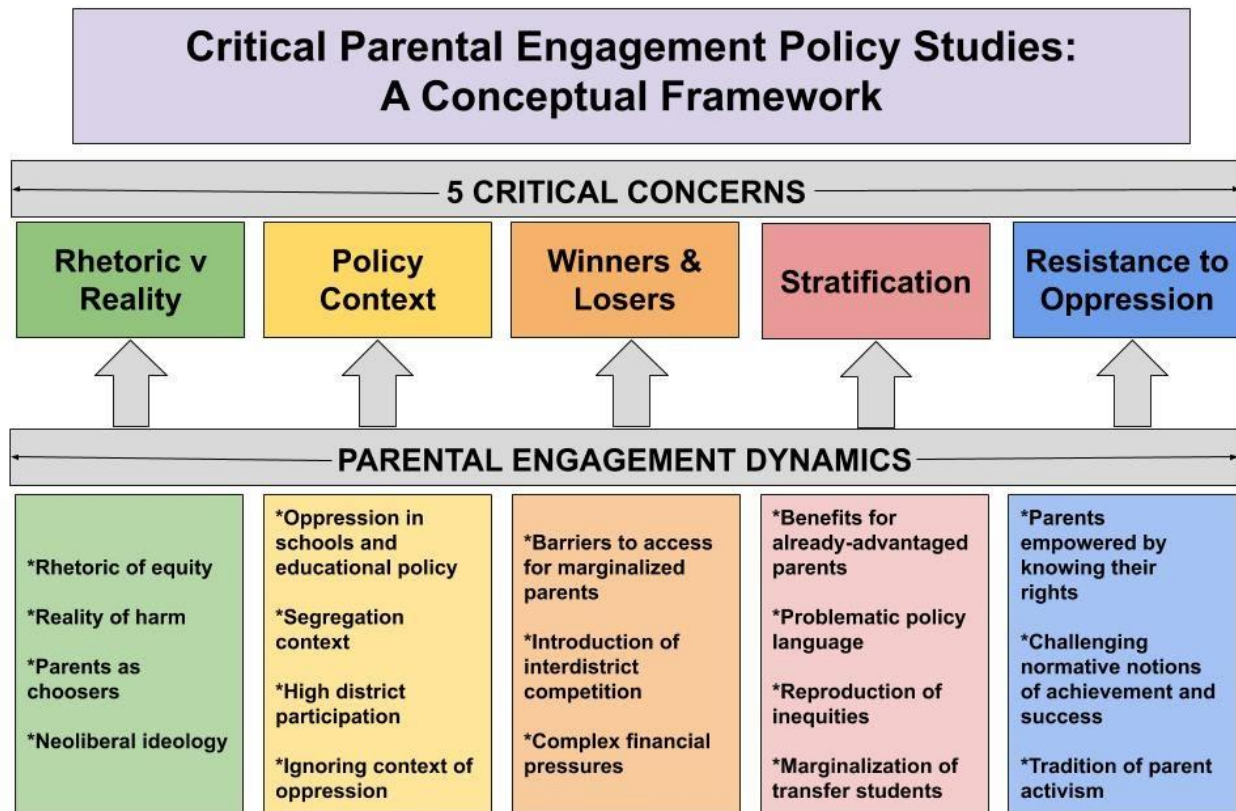


## Statement of Positionality & Ethical Commitments

My perspective as an educational researcher is deeply important to me, and I understand

that who I am plays an essential role in my work (Denzin, 2017; Diem et al., 2014). A useful

approach to reflecting upon one's positionality is through considering insider and outsider

perspectives within a given research context (Obasi, 2014). One very influential insider aspect of

my identity is that I am a lifelong Michigander who believes deeply in public education and

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[11] For a more in-depth illustration of these concepts, along with examples from data, see Appendix D.

strives to extend the benefits of an exceptional public education to all parents who want it for their children. In addition to that, of particular importance to this project is the fact that I am the graduate of Union High School in Grand Rapids. My years as a GRPS student showed me firsthand the day-to-day struggles of an urban high school and the impact of policies like schools of choice. Although faculty and staff did their best with the resources available in order to offer students an excellent education, the disparities between that educational experience and my previous ones were stark.

Some of my previous educational experiences include my elementary and middle school years of education at a Catholic school. While parochial schools are a different sort of school choice alternative than I study in this research, it is still important for me to reflect on how I am a beneficiary of school choice. As such, having this background represents both insider and outsider aspects in relation to school choice issues. I grew up in a working-class household, but generous donors contributed to my schooling. The education that I received was well-suited to my needs.

Other aspects of my positionality make me an outsider to some of the access and equity issues that I investigate in this work on schools of choice policy. I am explicitly studying issues that impact marginalized people, including people of color, immigrants, English language learners, and people with disabilities. I do not hold any of these identities and therefore must work hard to learn about the experiences of marginalized people and recognize my privilege in my work and in my life. I am also an outsider because I am neither a parent nor a policymaker. Because I do not personally understand those identities and experiences, I do my utmost to make careful, reasonable, and well-supported claims regarding both parents and policymakers. I

attempt to limit the scope of my claims to encompass the words and actions of important stakeholder groups and not make conjectures about their intentions or priorities.

This research tightly aligns with my identity as an activist researcher. As someone who has experienced many social advantages, I feel a deep sense of responsibility to oppose oppressive forces and work to dismantle them. Through these commitments, I am dedicated to illuminating some of the many inequities that are embedded in the US educational system, particularly those that affect urban students and their families.

My positionality impacts several aspects of this project. For instance, the educational environment in Kent ISD is of particular interest to me because it is my home district. I also choose to make comparisons between the urban district of Grand Rapids and the surrounding suburban districts because I have seen firsthand the social and economic toll that the exodus of students from GRPS has wrought over the last twenty-five years. Further, my priority of understanding the perpetuation in inequities through the Kent Choice Plan drives me to focus largely on the negative implications of the policy. A researcher with personal bias in favor of schools of choice policy and the Kent Choice Plan might reach some different conclusions than I do.

## Review of the Literature

The literature base on school choice is vast, even in the specific context of Michigan. Not surprisingly, however, much of that research focuses on issues such as evidence of effectiveness (Pogodzinski et al., 2017). Further, most of the policy-specific literature focuses on other forms of choice like charter schools (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012). This lack of work on interdistrict school choice is somewhat surprising given the widespread nature of its usage. That said, there is

some existing work on interdistrict choice in Michigan that lends valuable insights about this important educational context.

Some of the earliest work on Michigan's interdistrict choice law was conducted by Arsen et al. (1999). These authors detail important early indicators that the policy has some major design issues that have ramifications for district enrollments. They point out that while several districts were able to use the policy to improve enrollment numbers and subsequent finances, other districts saw large enrollment declines. Particularly in hard-hit urban districts, district officials were unable to take actions that could come anywhere near to compensating for these losses. Plank & Sykes (2000) build on this work and discuss how the competitive forces introduced by interdistrict choice are changing the education landscape in Michigan. More recent work by Addonizio & Kearney (2012) and Arsen et al. (2016) track that these enrollment and financial consequences have held over time. In fact, they argue that the difficulties faced by urban districts have only intensified, which has led to state intervention in urban districts such as Detroit, Inkster, Albion, and Pontiac. In a related line of inquiry, Ni & Arsen (2011) investigate district decisions to participate in interdistrict choice and find that many see the policy as a means to soften the financial blow of factors such as overall student population decreases in the state and in their districts.

Other authors address important access and equity issues that interdistrict choice raises. Wilkerson (2017) discusses access to Michigan's policy and its impacts on segregation in urban settings. He points out that in urban metropolitan areas such as Holland, white students--as opposed to students of color--are more likely to take advantage of interdistrict choice and leave urban districts. These differences in enrollment may indicate that white parents have more resources from which to draw, a finding that is supported by the work of Hill (2016). She argues

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through her research into a community-based access group in Detroit that parents of color and other minoritized parents often need help navigating the very complicated process of school choice. These findings raise important concerns about the impact of interdistrict choice and the need for adequate information and resources in order for the equitable implementation of policy.

Research on regional collaborative agreements also makes important contributions to our understanding of ways that districts are working together in school choice participation. This literature includes several pieces that study interdistrict choice programs in many regions throughout the country (see Finnigan & Scarbrough, 2013; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Holme et al., 2013; Holme & Richards, 2011 for examples). On the whole, the agreements studied in this body of literature were developed in order to combat decades of racial and economic segregation and provide expanded choice opportunities to parents throughout the region. Generally, these agreements are locally developed and come with their own local contexts of history, capacity, and political concerns. My preliminary investigations of the Kent Choice Program have revealed the program's own set of local-level nuances and shifts in implementation over time.

Despite the general topical similarities of these articles, this study makes important, different contributions. Districts in Kent ISD do claim that they are attempting to provide school choice opportunities to parents and that they are promoting equity in doing so. However, there are no explicit or implicit goals of decreasing racial or economic segregation in the region. Newspaper sources show that there were initial interests among district leaders in collectively protecting urban districts by mitigating some of the harmful effects of free-rein schools of choice participation. However, those interests of harm mitigation seem to have faded over the years and were never explicitly codified as program goals. Thus, the Kent Choice Program context bears important differences from the regions studied in the existing literature.

## Study Design

**Methodology**

This study leverages my conceptual framework and critical document analysis to analyze several publicly available documents about the Kent Choice Program. Critical document analysis is an emergent methodology with a basis in traditional qualitative document analysis approaches (Denzin, 2017; Maxwell, 2013; Neuendorf, 2016) that also incorporates critical conceptual frameworks. In the context of the present study, this methodology involves a very close reading of policy texts, observing the form and content of documents and looking for important patterns across texts. My critical turn involves analyzing policy texts for issues of power, privilege, identity, agency, and voice (Diem et al., 2014; Diem & Young, 2015).

Additionally, I draw on some aspects of critical discourse analysis (Rogers et al., 2016; Taylor, 2004) to inform my overall document analysis but more specifically to paint a picture of the history of the Kent Choice Program as documented in newspaper articles. I use discourse analysis to analyze testimonial video data as well. Critical discourse analysis is an increasingly common methodological approach among CPA scholars (Diem et al., 2014). My newspaper collection will primarily serve as a source of background information. However, many district superintendents and other leaders provided direct quotes to journalists regarding issues such as the history of the program, leader priorities, goals for participation, implications for winners and losers in the competition for choice parents, and shifts over time. These pieces of data make important contributions to our understanding of this policy context, so I feel that engaging with them through critical discourse analysis will make for a stronger and more insightful study. I further describe in my data analysis section the connections among my conceptual framework, overall methodological approach, and analysis process.

Table 21: *A Methodology Matrix for Investigating a Regional Collaborative Schools of Choice*

*Agreement*

| What do I need to know? (research questions) | Why do I need to know this? (goals) | What kind of data will answer these questions? | Methodology | Addressing trustworthiness |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Q1: What are the form and content of policy documents about the Kent Choice Program? | descriptive: learn about what these policies look like, how information is shared, what language is used | Kent Choice Program policy documents | critical document analysis | positionality; triangulation; public disclosure; audit trail; peer consultation |
| Q2: What do policy and archival documents reveal about the nature of this agreement and the context behind it? | descriptive & critical: what have people said about the agreement over time; decisions about various districts' participation over time | Kent Choice Program policy documents; Plan website; district schools of choice websites; archival newspapers | critical discourse analysis & critical document analysis | same |
| Q3: What are the potential parent access and equity implications embedded with the Kent Choice Program's informational and guiding documents? | critical: assess what power dynamics are embedded in the policy; learn how the policy might perpetuate already existing inequities and limits on access for marginalized people | Kent Choice Program policy documents; Plan website; district schools of choice websites; archival newspapers | critical document analysis | same |

## Data Sources & Collection

All data sources were collected through online searches. They include:

- Local newspaper reports

  - Mostly from the *Grand Rapids Press* from 2000-2019

  - Includes 65 articles

  - Includes some quantitative seat opening and enrollment data

- The Kent Choice Program website

  - ~4 pages when printed

- A promotional brochure

  - 4 pages

- A general informational document about the program

  - 3 pages

- The schools of choice websites for each of the 20 participating districts

    o Range from 1-3 pages

- A map of Kent ISD and its 20 districts

- GRPS parent testimonial videos

    o Produced by the district and featuring parents who chose GRPS for their children

    o 12 videos posted on YouTube, 2015-2020, 1-2 minutes long

These data sources contain a wealth of information about the planning, adoption, and implementation of the Kent Choice Program and details about individual districts' participation. KISD documents contain many important pieces of program information including application deadlines and procedures; goals of the program; restrictions on participation; and recommendation of factors to consider when selecting districts to apply to. District websites contain some similar information in addition to more general district details and, in some cases, information about district and grade seat openings. I also make note of any details that districts make available in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, paying special attention to shifts in application procedures. I include a Kent ISD map to provide context for the geography of the region and the configuration of individual districts within the ISD.

I collected sixty-five newspaper articles through MLive.com and Newsbank, an Access World News archive available through MSU Library's FirstSearch. While I have attempted to collect as extensive a body of newspaper articles as I could, I surely was not able to find all pertinent articles that were ever published in the *Grand Rapids Press* or elsewhere. I do not intend to conduct a full analysis of these sources. Instead, my interest in the discourse in these articles is bound to what stakeholders said regarding schools of choice. Engaging in only a limited analysis of my newspaper data will limit the claims that I make about it.

Another important limitation is the comparative lack of parent perspective within these articles. There are a handful of interviews and other quotes from parents in this body of articles, but the primary perspective comes from district and Kent ISD leaders. Another issue of coverage involves which district leaders are represented in these articles. Some articles are more holistic than others in covering different districts, but there is a strong trend of interviews from representatives of a handful of districts but not others. Because of these limitations, I take great care in crafting my arguments and restricting claims to focus on what was said by those quoted. I do not make claims about the entirety of discourse about schools of choice in Kent ISD over the years.

However, I do include in my data sources a dozen "Proud Parent" testimonial videos from GRPS parents. These were recorded and posted on the GRPS YouTube channel from 2015-2020. These data are analyzed through Diem & Young's (2015) fifth critical concern, which focuses on the choices, actions, and resistance of members of non-dominant groups.

**Data Analysis**

My data analysis approach centers on deductive-dominant coding. As Armat et al. (2018) argue, the qualitative analysis process rarely adheres to exclusively inductive or deductive coding. Instead, it is likely that one approach is dominant and incorporates important aspects of the other. The authors further stress the iterative nature of coding as researchers move through considerations of literature, conceptual underpinnings, and data. Guided by these ideas, I employ my conceptual framework to directly inform the deductive aspects of my analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007). Diem & Young's (2015) five critical concerns, within the context of the critical parental engagement literature, acted as my coding themes as I analyzed my data. However, I

remained open to the inclusion of emergent, inductive themes in my analysis as part of an iterative process.

My analysis process began with a thorough first reading of all of my data sources, taking copious notes and highlighting quotes and issues of particular interest. I then return to the source literature for my conceptual framework to help me make sense of connections between the existing literature and my data. During my second reading of my data, I started to use the five critical concerns to scaffold my coding process, essentially using each concern as a theme.

This involved matching specific pieces of data items (such as exemplar quotes or 1-3 sentence pieces of document text) to the relevant concern. I also assigned some topical considerations to the pertinent theme. For instance, if a district refused to accept paper applications in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, I coded that under concern 3 because that involves equitable access to resources. As part of my iterative, deductive-dominant approach, I also left room for the emergence of unanticipated codes. For example, I did not anticipate district superintendents to so candidly discuss how the state's school funding system was hurting all public schools. In that case, I coded those comments under Concern 3: winners and losers: state funding problems.

I also memoed heavily throughout my analysis process to ensure that I kept track of the coding decisions I made and any issues that arose that impacted my data. Additionally, I had regular conversations with my advisor and peers about the directions of my analysis; theory application and formulation; ethical practice; and triangulation.

**Trustworthiness**

As a qualitative researcher with a critical worldview, I make no claims of objectivity in my study (Denzin, 2017). However, I do take several measures to ensure that my methods for

collecting and analyzing my data are sound, reasonable, and ethical. These trustworthiness

strategies are designed to provide accountability for how I conduct my study and make claims

through my findings (Anfara et al., 2002; Maxwell, 2013). Further, these strategies do not imply

objective truth but rather aim to support reasonable interpretations of the meaning of events,

dynamics, and phenomena through my subjective lens as a researcher (Merriam, 2002).

Another important aspect of my critical approach is my discussion of my positionality as

a researcher. This reflexive approach allows peers and readers to consider how my identity and

experiences holistically influence my work (Anfara, 2002). Specificto this study, I reflect upon

how my identity as a person with several privileges and my experiences as a student in Grand

Rapids impact my commitment to studying issues of equity and inclusion for marginalized

parents. Within this schools of choice context, I also consider how not being a parent or

policymaker means that I should limit my interpretations to the words and actions of

stakeholders. I do my utmost to avoid claims about parents' or policymakers' intentions unless

those are clearly stated in my data.

I also leverage triangulation as a trustworthiness strategy. This involved the collection

and analysis of multiple data sources that are all related to the phenomenon of the Kent Choice

Program (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2002). The documents within

my collection of data come from ISD and district sources, including Kent Choice Program policy

documents, the Kent Choice Program website, and the schools of choice websites of

participating districts, and parent testimonial videos produced by GRPS. Those documents are

supplemented by independent news sources, particularly the *Grand Rapids Press*. Drawing from

multiple types of sources means that multiple perspectives on the same programs and events are

analyzed, deepening my understanding of the Kent Choice Program and supporting my general claims about challenges to access and equity in the context.

Active and ongoing consultation with scholarly peers was also an asset in this project (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). These discussions involved the reasonableness of my data collection and analysis process as well as my interpretations of my findings. This also includes soliciting feedback about my data collection and analysis instruments such as my coding process. This consultation strategy has been invaluable in helping me conceptualize my project as a whole. It has also helped me think deeply about my own perspective and positionality in relation to topics of educational opportunity and how policy documents can impact access and equity for marginalized parents.

## Findings Overview

The Kent Choice Program may help mitigate some of the informational and logistical barriers that parents face when thinking about school choice options. However, my preliminary analysis suggests parents may still face some difficult barriers that prevent some parents from being able to make use of the program. These barriers may make stratification like racial and economic segregation even worse in districts in the region that lose students. Documentation of the Kent Choice Program's response to the Covid-19 pandemic raises new but related issues in regard to parent access. Although Kent ISD extended the application deadline by two weeks in 2020 (April 13-June 1), they also allowed districts the option of restricting applications to online-only. A few offer forms that can be filled out on a smartphone, but others only accept pdf forms that present internet access challenges. Thus, the socioeconomic divide may be an even stronger access factor this year than in prior ones.

Investigations also suggest that this program plays an important role in facilitating choice throughout districts in the ISD, with ebbs and flows in the participation and priorities of the Kent Choice Program and districts over time. It is also clear that schools of choice policy is creating winners and losers among districts, parents, and students in Michigan. Kent ISD appears to be no exception. Archival newspaper data reveals early concerns among all districts for protecting GRPS, the largest urban district in the region. As time progressed, however, districts faced increasing ideological pressure from school choice advocates and financial pressure from state population decline and competition from other school choice options. As a result, districts began to participate more extensively and open more seats for transfer. Through trial and error, many districts spent several school years hammering out a process for determining their ideal enrollment levels and subsequent seat openings. According to the superintendent of Comstock Park, "A lot of analysis goes into determining the appropriate seats to open while maintaining educational quality" (*Grand Rapids Press*, 09/03/14).

In the end, a clear tension emerges within the discourse between providing choices for parents and suburban districts balancing their budgets. Discourses also reveal racist and classist feelings among some stakeholders who were resistant to allowing transfer students into their districts. All the while, GRPS bled students to other districts while trying desperately to retain and attract parents through innovative schools and programming. Despite the original intent of districts to protect GRPS and other urban districts, the ultimate ramp-up of schools of choice participation in the last two decades has eclipsed any original protectionist intentions.

**Critical Findings**

The following code map illustrates the critical concepts that I applied to my deductive-dominant analysis. At the top, Diem & Young's (2015) five critical concerns act as my themes of

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analysis. The next level down contains concepts from the parental engagement literature, while the bottom level depicts examples from the data. Below this diagram, each section of this critical analysis is organized according to the five critical concerns. Each section is accompanied by a diagram that shows the relationship between a given critical concern, the related parental engagement dynamics, and examples of evidence from the data.

Figure 11: *Critical Code Map of Collaborative Schools of Choice Agreements*



## Critical Code Map: Collaborative Schools of Choice Agreements

**THEMES**

| Rhetoric v Reality | Policy Context | Winners & Losers | Stratification | Resistance to Oppression |
|---|---|---|---|---|

**CATEGORIES**

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Rhetoric of equity<br><br>*Reality of harm<br><br>*Parents as choosers<br><br>*Neoliberal ideology | *Oppression in schools and educational policy<br><br>*Segregation context<br><br>*High district participation<br><br>*Ignoring context of oppression | *Barriers to access for marginalized parents<br><br>*Introduction of interdistrict competition<br><br>*Complex financial pressures | *Benefits for already-advantaged parents<br><br>*Problematic policy language<br><br>*Reproduction of inequities<br><br>*Marginalization of transfer students | *Parents empowered by knowing their rights<br><br>*Challenging normative notions of achievement and success<br><br>*Tradition of parent activism |

**DATA**

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Tension among competing interests<br><br>*Equity rhetoric vs actual access | *Competitive financial pressures<br><br>*Little policymaker understanding of consequences | *Urban school "death spirals"<br><br>*Suburban schools get to try to fill to capacity<br><br>*Distribution of information only in English restricts access | *Struggles facing urban schools become more concentrated<br><br>*MI's choice policy allows districts to reject students with disciplinary records | *Parents who do use the policy may feel empowered by choice<br><br>*Pushback from urban districts |

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**Policy Rhetoric vs. Practiced Reality**

Table 22: *Concern Regarding the Difference between Policy Rhetoric and Practiced Reality*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Concern regarding the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality | <ul><li>Proponents claim policies will support equity</li><li>On the whole, policies actually tend to worsen inequities</li></ul> | <ul><li>Despite equity rhetoric, many parents may not have access to the policy</li><li>Tension between parent choice and protecting GRPS vs. district financial motivations</li></ul> |

As the first critical concern that they identify, Diem & Young (2015) note that CPA scholars point to important differences between what people *say* about policy and what they *do* with a policy, along with what the policy consequences are. Arguments in favor of a policy proposal are important to encouraging people to buy into ideology and ultimately getting policy enacted. However, the reality of policy implementation can look very different from how proponents envision it. In the schools of choice environment in West Michigan, the Kent Choice Program is no different.

**Parent choice vs. suburban district budget concerns.**

*Arguments for the Kent Choice Program.*

In the early days of the Kent Choice Program, the rhetoric in favor of lifting the 1% cap in the ISD largely fell in line with what proponents were saying before the state laws were passed in 1996. Arguments were many, including decrying the so-called monopoly that local public schools had on the education of children within their boundaries. "They're holding kids hostage in a failing district," said Republican State Sen. Glenn D. Steil (*Grand Rapids Press,* 1/8/2001). Many more advocated for the principle that parents deserved the right to choose

schools for their children, regardless of where they lived. At their core, these arguments make claim to equity, although they advocate for equity for individuals over collective equity.

Backers of choice expansion also argued that GRPS would not be hurt by schools of choice and would likely even improve through the pressures of competition. Scott Jenkins, a former education policy advisor to former Gov. John Engler, argued, "The sad thing is that they think they're protecting Grand Rapids schools, when in fact, the Grand Rapids schools have many programs that could attract students from the suburban districts if the city schools marketed themselves correctly" (*Grand Rapids Press*, 3/20/2002).

As a vocal critic of the cap, the *Grand Rapids Press* editorial board was very clear about their stance in 2001:

Schools ought not be putting institutional concerns ahead of the interests of individual children. Government in this country is organized around the principle of serving the people, not protecting the system. In the case of schools, that means trying to accommodate the parent seeking a transfer, not contriving to deny that wish in order to shield the organization. (1/14/2001, editorial)

The board goes on in this editorial to argue that schools of choice is unlikely to have a negative impact on GRPS. "Anyone fearing a choice maelstrom need only look elsewhere in Michigan. School choice is a minor factor in student movement statewide, just as it has been in other states." As we now know, fears of a maelstrom were indeed justified, as students within Kent ISD and across the state have ultimately left urban districts by the thousands, many never to return.

At the same time, district leaders in the early 2000s also insisted that their priority was protecting GRPS while offering some more options to parents who were interested in choice.

Forest Hills Superintendent Michael Washburn stated in 2001, "I think we're all very concerned about the Grand Rapids schools and we're especially sensitive to its needs in terms of its infrastructure. Nobody believes Grand Rapids is a failing district, but maybe putting a blockade around it isn't the best way to solve the problem" (*Grand Rapids Press*, 3/16/2001).

The lack of a cap in 2001 raised concerns again the following year, after GRPS lost several students and their per-pupil funding through schools of choice. The Kent Choice Program opted to install a 2% cap on transfers into districts but not out of them as a response in 2002. Kent ISD Superintendent Michael Weiler expressed concerns about the harm to GRPS, saying:

> 'When does competition become unhealthy? When it becomes competition at the expense of others,' Weiler said. 'I think we're taking a common sense approach to school choice. We want to fill all the parents' requests, but we also want to keep a level playing field for all our districts' (*Grand Rapids Press*, 3/20/02).

The emphasis of Kent ISD and district leaders remained a balance between maintaining a funding base for urban schools while also offering some parents the opportunity to transfer their students.

This rhetoric of collaboration among districts while accommodating parent interest in choice continues into the present day of the Kent Choice Program, as evidenced by the program's goals:

- "Meet the needs of parents, students, schools and communities within Kent ISD.
- Provide opportunities for families to seek the best options available for their children.
- Strengthen collaboration and cooperation within and among schools.
- Better utilize and share resources among schools" (Kent Intermediate Superintendents' Association, 2020).

While I discuss the prospects for cooperation later under my third critical concern, it is worth noting here that part of the public face of this program is the notion that it exists to balance many desires. It is easy to see areas of potential conflict within them.

### *Financial issues outweighing parent choice principles.*

Before long, however, suburban district leaders in Kent ISD began recognizing the financial opportunities that schools of choice presented for their districts. Some district leaders attributed this shift in thinking to a shift in both district and ISD leadership over time. Many superintendents were surprisingly candid about their views on leveraging choice--and often ignored the damage done to GRPS. In reference to opening up to schools of choice, Wyoming Superintendent John Felske stated 2003, "Like a lot of districts, we're always looking for new opportunities to generate revenue" (*Grand Rapids Press*, 3/16/03). Seven years later in 2010, he maintained the same stance and upped his rhetoric on competing against other districts, arguing, "If districts have openings, there is nothing wrong with competing to fill them" (*Grand Rapids Press*, 4/19/10).

As we moved into the 2000s, districts began to face serious financial shortfalls. Leaders pointed to several factors, including decreased state funding, workers leaving the state, and declining birthrate. Even districts that had historically been on sound financial footing were facing major budget shortfalls. Rockford Superintendent Michael Shibler stated, "If we fill every one of those slots, we're looking at wiping out half the deficit" (*Grand Rapids Press*, 3/16/03). This kind of budget focus was central to the comments of many superintendents, while rhetoric about parent choice and offering opportunities to parents fell by the wayside. It was not until around 2016 that district leaders started candidly discussing the damage done to GRPS.

**Policy Context**

Table 23: *Concern Regarding the Policy, Its Roots, and Its Development*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| **2. Concern regarding the policy, its roots, and its development (context)** | <ul><li>Historical and contemporary context of oppression in schools and educational policy</li><li>Problematic parental engagement policy language</li></ul> | <ul><li>Policy introduces competitive financial pressures in an already-complicated school funding environment</li><li>Policymakers had little understanding of the consequences of policy for districts and parents</li></ul> |

In my background section, I provided a descriptive overview of the development of Kent Choice Program and its evolution over time as well as some discussion of its current context. However, a deeper analysis shows the major access and equity concerns that arise from this context (Diem & Young, 2015). As with the state's overall schools of choice policies, the Kent Choice Program is rooted in neoliberal ideology that frames parents as choosers (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). This dynamic comes with several consequences. First, parents are responsible for seeking out and finding quality educational opportunities for their children. Instead of the public institutions of education being responsible for offering excellent neighborhood schools where families live, parents must act as consumers to acquire the education they want for their children. Further, this neoliberal policy environment bears all the hallmarks of a diversion from urban public institutions and into suburban institutions (Kruse & Segrue, 2006).

Specifically within the context of the Kent Choice Program, we see that districts increasingly had little regard over time for the students and parents who were left behind as a result of the policy. The policy emphasis has been on offering choice, not on providing opportunities and resources to help GRPS improve. Just as importantly, it is unclear if the

program was designed because parents wanted it or if this was merely a result of district and ISD leaders molding a policy to match their own policy priorities. We must also ask *which* desires of *which* parents are addressed by the policy. Data from this study provides no evidence that parents were even consulted in policy development, despite the fact that parents are supposedly the targets of the benefits of the Kent Choice Program. A large body of literature finds that parents are rarely part of the policy development process, and those who are tend to be from more privileged social groups (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Calabrese Barton et al., 2004; Lareau, 2000).

**Creation of Winners & Losers**

Table 24: *Concern with the Distribution of Power, Resources, and Knowledge as well as the Creation of Policy "Winners" and "Losers"*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| **3. Concern with the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge as well as the creation of policy "winners" and "losers"** | <ul><li>Centering of the school</li><li>Gatekeeping functions within schools and districts</li><li>Logistical, social, and emotional barriers for parents</li><li>Competitive forces hurt parents in districts that cannot compete</li></ul> | <ul><li>Urban schools lose massive financial resources: "death spirals"</li><li>Suburban schools get to try to fill to capacity</li><li>Distribution of information only in English restricts access</li></ul> |

**Power.**

The Kent Choice Program may contribute to an expansion of power for some underserved parents. The streamlining of program information, rules, processes, and deadlines for all districts likely makes the program easier to access for some families. Further, parents need only fill out a single application to apply to three different districts, ranked in order of preference. However, this process may actually limit the number of districts that parents can apply to. The Kent Choice Program reference document states, "The only limit on movement

between school districts for most students in the Kent ISD Collaborative Schools of Choice Plan is the space available in the desired district or the Choice students' suspension or expulsion record." Despite the purportedly open nature of the program, it is unclear whether parents may apply to districts beyond the three that they list on their application. This application procedure may act as a soft limit on the number of districts parents can apply to.

**Resources.**

Differences in access to resources are also an important issue that affects parents' ability to participate in the Kent Choice Program. Michigan's schools of choice policies do not require districts to provide transportation to transfer students, and none of the Kent ISD districts choose to do so. The amount of time required just to research and apply to schools can affect parents differently as well. Parents must do research on various districts and their offerings and work their way through the application process. They may find it necessary to try to speak with other parents about districts to understand the educational culture and climate those districts provide. Evidence from newspaper archives points to this disparity in parent resources. East Grand Rapids Superintendent described the reaction of some parents upon hearing that his district had decided to accept students through schools of choice. The Grand Rapids Press wrote, "'We had some parents come in here with what looked like resumes for their children,' he said. 'We couldn't accept them, of course. We had to explain there would be a lottery'" (*Grand Rapids Press*, 06/05/01). Clearly, some parents with logistical resources hoped that they could tip the scales in favor of their own children and essentially approach schools of choice participation as they might a private school.

**Knowledge.**

One of the primary ways that the Kent Choice Program influences parent access is through the information that it provides. While districts do make available the number of overall seats they make available in their district, many of them do not take the extra step to report how many seats they have open in each grade. This seems inconsistent with the Michigan schools of choice laws, which state, "The district shall publish the grades, schools, and special programs, if any, for which enrollment may be available to, and for which applications will be accepted from, nonresident applicants residing within the same intermediate district" (Section 105.2.a; Section 105C.2.a). Given how district decisions are described by leaders in newspaper articles, it seems that some districts have decided that reporting a single number for the district is more advantageous to strategically fill seats. It seems that there is no oversight from the state regarding compliance. That is no surprise, as Michigan Department of Education staff were cut from 2,200 to 400 between 2000 and 2010 (Murray, 2001). This almost certainly cut the department's oversight capacity, leaving these sorts of matters up for review only if an involved party calls for a policy audit.[12]

Further, some district leaders said that they essentially padded their numbers of available seats. Although they recognized that this was something of a gamble and could result in more applications than they desired, it also meant that if they received fewer applications than they desired during the application period, they could continue accepting new transfer students

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[12] There was at least one recorded case of Kent ISD calling for an MDE audit of district participation in the Kent Choice Program. Then-GRPS Superintendent Bernard Taylor had a practice of often denying requests of former charter and private school parents to transfer out of the district. Under previous superintendents, those parents were allowed to transfer their students to public districts in Kent ISD once their children aged out of their current schools, as many of those schools are K-5 or K-8. Parents were allowed to do so at any time during the year. Kent ISD requested a state policy audit on the matter in 2007. MDE found that GRPS could not force those students to stay in their home district, but parents would need to apply to the Kent Choice Program through the same process and timeline as all other parents in Kent ISD.

throughout the summer. It is clear that the Kent Choice Program and the Michigan policy has forced districts into a complicated and sometimes difficult analytical process in determining open seats, as indicated by newspaper sources. However, this policy was designed to give parents choices. Good and complete information is necessary to make good choices, and leaving parents in the dark about the true enrollment situations in districts could hinder parents' ability to make the best choice for their children.

The language of program materials is also an important issue. With the exception of its actual application form, which is available in Spanish, the program only provides materials in English. This limit on the availability of materials for parents who do not speak English is certainly a barrier for some parents interested in schools of choice. Further, it may stratify the parents who can use schools of choice along language lines.

**Winners & Losers.**

As I have discussed in various ways, the Kent Choice Program has produced winners and losers--and may have made some disparities worse than if the main state schools of choice law had been the only policy in place. A major factor in this dynamic is district overhead. All districts must maintain a certain level of expenditures to cover the cost of things like facilities, maintenance, and salaries for faculty and staff. Those costs persist regardless of how many students are in districts, until the budgetary situation becomes so dire that districts must make drastic cuts. So, while districts who receive a net positive number of students get more money for the same overhead costs, districts with a net loss of students *also* have the same overhead as the previous year but less overall funding. Given that the Kent Choice Program makes it easier for parents to transfer out and participating districts long ago abandoned their protections of GRPS, this program has likely made these interdistrict disparities even worse.

While it is easy to see that some districts have been big winners and GRPS has been a big loser in the program, parents and students have been winners and losers as well. I speak later about GRPS's successes in rebounding from some of their losses, but the overall effect on the financial health of the district and what it can offer to families has been devastating. Like so many urban districts across Michigan, the district has closed several schools in the last twenty years and eliminated the positions of numerous personnel. These cuts resulted in larger class sizes and fewer educational offerings that persisted for several years until a massive district restructuring plan was implemented. Urban districts have been largely powerless to stem this mass exodus, but so have the families who were unable to leave or chose not to.

**Covid-19 Issues.**

Kent ISD attempted to compensate for some factors of the Covid-19 pandemic by extending the application deadline until June 1, 2020. Because schools in Michigan were closed by executive order in mid-March, Kent ISD did not require districts to accept paper or mail-in applications. It seems that they hoped that Michigan's stay-at-home order would be lifted before the application deadline, allowing for parents to somehow deliver paper applications if that was their only means of access. However, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer did not lift the order until after the application deadline.

Some districts did still allow for mail-in applications. However, some parents may have had difficulty accessing even paper forms if they had not already gotten a physical form from a district. Many parents do not have at-home internet and printer access and rely on public resources like libraries to do online business. With libraries closed as well, some parents may have only had internet access via smartphones. Some Kent ISD districts do have online fillable forms through services like Google Docs. Others do not, leaving parents unable to fill out PDF

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versions of the form. Districts also had varying and unclear availability of applications, including webforms, in Spanish. Kent ISD did attempt to compensate for some issues that would affect underserved parents the most, but it seems that they did not account for every potential barrier. The deadline extension was a step in the right direction toward expanded access, but they could have taken other approaches such as pledging to extend the deadline until after the stay-at-home order was lifted. They could have also offered to be the point organization for mailing out paper applications and processing them when they were sent back.

Another important impact of the pandemic was the elimination of the possibility of on-site school visits by parents. Kent ISD recommends that parents visit schools and speak with personnel to assess several topics, including school resources, curriculum, and environment. Visits can be important moments for parents to gauge whether their children might flourish in those school spaces. This suspension of visits was beyond the control of Kent ISD and any of the districts, but they could have taken proactive steps to offer alternative means of connection between parents and educators.

**Reproduction of Social Stratification**

Table 25: *Concern Regarding Stratification and the Broader Effect a Given Policy Has on Relationships of Inequality and Privilege*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| **4. Concern regarding stratification and the broader effect a given policy has on relationships of inequality and privilege** | • Policy tends to benefit already-advantaged parents<br>• Reproduction and potential worsening of inequalities and inequities through policy | • Struggles facing urban schools become more concentrated<br>• MI's choice policy allows districts to reject students with disciplinary records |

The documents provided by the Kent Choice Program direct readers to think about schools, parents, and students in very particular ways. More specifically, these documents put forth ideas about the ideal versions of each of these groups. The program's "10 Considerations When Selecting a School" present a prime example of this skewed perspective. This list, which is a series of questions that the program urges parents to answer for themselves about schools, stands to play an important role in the reproduction of ideas about schooling and the stakeholders involved. This reproduction poses concerning equity implications.

**What is a Good School?**

The 10 Considerations are largely based on questions regarding the resources available within schools. These include references to facilities, programs, materials, extracurricular offerings, technology, faculty, and staff. For instance, parents are encouraged to ask, "What is the student-teacher ratio? Will your child get the attention he or she needs to succeed?" It is plain that some schools have more of these resources than others--in some cases, many more. Kent ISD districts are no exception. These comparisons stand to amplify the ability of some districts to compete over others. The document also encourages parents to assess the friendliness of students, faculty, and staff present in schools. As a culturally constructed concept, factors such as perceptions of friendliness have no clear bearing on the quality of education a student may or may not receive. Further, parents may misinterpret nonverbal cues of people from social groups to which they do not personally belong. This list promotes notions of achievement and quality as well, perpetuating these notions as fixed and objective when they are fluid and subjective.

**What is a Good Parent?**

Kent Choice Program documents also construct notions of what good parents do, say, believe, and know. Inherent to the existence of this program is the framing of parents as

choosers. Not only are parents seen as consumers who are shopping around for the best options but they are also seen as *responsible* for obtaining a quality education for their children (Baquedano-López, 2013). Through this neoliberal conceptualization, responsibility for providing education is shifted from public institutions onto private individuals. This is a tall order for many families, particularly marginalized ones. These 10 Considerations also require that parents essentially be educational experts with the ability to evaluate educational offerings such as curriculum, technology integration, quality of materials, and adequacy of faculty. For example, the 10 Considerations include questions like, "Does the curriculum meet state and national standards?" and "How does the school integrate technology into the classroom?" If parents are not engaged in this way, they may be cast as uncaring and deficient (Lareau, 2000; Lightfoot, 2004).

**What is a Good Student?**

Discourses about the Kent Choice Program, particularly early-on, reveal feelings among some people in communities receiving transfer students that those students are not, in fact, good students. Newspaper sources indicate the widespread use of racially coded language (Castagno, 2008) as people talked about transfer students in whiter, more affluent suburbs. In Forest Hills, the *Grand Rapids Press* reported that "School district leaders have fielded claims that out-of-district students might be academically lacking and responsible for criminal mischief at Northern High" (*Grand Rapids Press,* 10/21/05). Similar problematic language surfaced in reporting about Rockford: "Parents worried that school choice might crowd classrooms or take spots on athletic teams away from Rockford children. They only reluctantly supported bringing in outside students to raise revenues" (*Grand Rapids Press*, 2/28/02). These claims about safety, quality,

overcrowding, and sapping opportunities away from resident students are blatant attempts to maintain the homogeneity and privilege of wealthier, whiter districts. (Castagno, 2008).

It is also important to note that students who do transfer to predominantly white schools risk the difficult effects of Racial Opportunity Cost (Venzant Chambers & Huggins, 2014). The pressures of conformity in order to survive--on all levels--diminishes the capacity of students of color to lead full, authentic lives and experience healthy childhoods. On a different but related note, research by Cowen et al., (2015) finds that students of color and students living in poverty are in fact using schools of choice policy to transfer to new schools. However, they are also likely to transfer multiple times, experiencing levels of instability in schooling that may have negative effects on achievement and wellness. It is clear that many students living in Kent ISD have made use of the Kent Choice Program over the last two decades. However, marginalized students experience the most negative effects of a program that, at least according to rhetoric, was designed to help them the most.

**Resistance to Oppression**

Table 26: *Concern Regarding the Nature of Resistance to or Engagement in Policy by Members of Non-Dominant Groups*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| **5. Concern regarding the nature of resistance to or engagement in policy by members of non-dominant groups** | • Parents empowered by knowing their rights | • Parents who do use the policy may feel empowered by choice <br> • Pushback from urban districts |

As their fifth critical concern, Diem & Young (2015) note that many CPA scholars attend to how members of non-dominant groups resist oppressive policies and practices and fight for

agency in educational processes. In analyzing the Kent ISD context, I focus this aspect of my analysis on GRPS and the parents who send their children to GRPS schools. As we have seen throughout this study, the fate of GRPS has been closely intertwined with the decisions that parents have made over nearly 25 years of schools of choice in Michigan.

The Grand Rapids metropolitan educational market is an important example of the post-World War II shift in allocating policy resources and priorities away from urban environments and toward suburban ones (Kruse & Segrue, 2006). As discussed above, GRPS has been the major marginalized party as the largest urban district within the Kent Choice Program. However, the district and its parents have taken important steps in recent years to rise up from the financial devastation inflicted by schools of choice. Parents across the district support their schools in many ways, often through the choice not to leave even though they have the ability to do so.

While the Kent Choice Program initially protected GRPS from the devastation of enrollment losses, the policy and its rule shifts over the years likely played an important role in the exodus of parents from the district. GRPS was forced to respond with the typical slew of school closures that have happened in urban districts across the state. However, the district began a drive toward innovative school structures and practices as well. These special programs include K-12 Montessori; bilingual immersion; theme schools built around subject areas like The Arts, STEM, and museum studies; differentiated instruction; and partnerships with colleges, universities, and cultural institutions in Grand Rapids and across the state. As evidenced by testimonial interviews with GRPS parents in 2015, these special offerings have been an important draw for parents who choose to keep their students in their local urban schools. One parent of a GRPS Museum School student noted, "This type of new creation and innovation is

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one that is providing parents like me the ability to rethink and say, you know, we should be investing in GRPS" (Tom, Museum School).

Parents' reasons for choosing GRPS also stem beyond the educational programs. Several parents stated that they valued the diversity that their children experienced and contributed to in their schools. They point to the many benefits of their children attending neighborhood schools, including the convenience and their children's ability to attend school with their friends who also live in their neighborhood. Just as importantly, several of the parents interviewed expressed that sending their students to GRPS aligned with their social priorities. One parent stated, "We're committed to the city, we're committed to the city's success, and that's not gonna happen without GRPS" (Emily & Jono, Congress Elementary).

Several participants stated that they had the resources (financial, time, transportation, etc.) to send their children to different educational options outside of GRPS. However, the district's commitment to providing parents with attractive options in their own communities intersects in meaningful ways with some residents' desires and commitments to support local schools. This relationship between the district and its parents have helped it survive the devastating effects of student enrollment declines, which several other districts in the state have not been able to weather. "'We are poised to be one of the first urban districts in the state--if not the nation--to stabilize and grow,' said GRPS Superintendent Teresa Weatherall Neal in her State of our Schools address May 16" (*Grand Rapids Press*, 5/24/15).

### Discussion & Implications

This study sheds light on important, understudied factors within the interdistrict school choice landscape in Michigan. As an example of a collaborative agreement, the Choice Plan may indeed stand to facilitate some collaboration and greater access for parents to educational

choices. At the same time, the Kent Choice Program may actually present greater competitive pressures for underresourced districts within the agreement. The program states that it is designed to streamline processes and ultimately benefit all stakeholders involved, and this project assesses the viability of those goals and exposes ways that the program may actually be making equity issues worse for some parents.

After careful analysis, this work reveals many challenges to access and equity for marginalized parents within this policy environment. As I describe above, policy data reveal numerous factors that illuminate the likelihood that already-advantaged parents are better positioned to use schools of choice policy. From the language of policy documents to the statements made by district leaders regarding its implementation over the years, evidence clearly shows that competitive pressures have outweighed initial goals of offering parents choices. As is so common in educational policy, goals of equitable opportunities for marginalized parents have largely been superseded by the interests of already advantaged parents and districts. These real-world policy dynamics fall into a well-documented historical pattern of disinvestment from cities and marginalized people toward the interests of suburban areas (Kruse & Segrue, 2006).

While many parents do opt to send their children to districts outside their own neighborhoods, it is important to remember that there are worthwhile opportunities for parents to invest in urban public schools by sending their children there and becoming part of a community. At the same time, more privileged parents should be mindful of their engagement with school communities and the power they bring to school environments. As Posey-Maddox (2014) investigates, middle-class parents who choose urban schools have a pattern of overpowering local schools with their own values and desires. Such parents should work to build authentic

partnerships with schools that are based on equitable, collective priorities and not solely their own.

These parent access issues are part of a broader environment of school finance. Urban districts in Michigan are currently fighting for their lives. While this may have been what choice advocates wanted, it's by no means a fair fight. On the one hand, suburban districts are able to offer what to some are more advantageous learning environments. Those districts get to fill their seats and fill up their coffers without any change in overhead. At the same time, urban districts are bleeding students and, as a result, taking drastic action in order to stay afloat. The common go-to is first cutting specialists, then cutting core faculty, then closing neighborhood schools. If districts can't weather the funding crisis, they get dissolved entirely in favor of sending them to whiter, wealthier districts. In the rare cases that districts have adapted, it has required a systemwide overhaul toward new and innovative models that take years to design and years to implement with success.

When we get down to it, the reality is that schools simply can't compete with each other in an equitable way. In the business world, individual and collective businesses have tremendous freedom to shift their business models, even drastically. A paper company that's on the ropes can start selling cleaning chemicals, or choose to grow by opening a new branch in a different city. Or they can look for new investors and grants. Traditional public schools have no such elasticity. In Michigan, traditional school districts are incredibly limited in how they can solve budget issues. They're not allowed to raise operational and instructional funds through property taxes, and even if they could, that couldn't happen in an equitable way because property tax bases are rooted in local wealth. That varies so widely across the state and often one zip code to the next, which is why the state dissolved that system in the first place. Schools can't look for investors to

help with funds, and they can't start selling new products. The only resource they can tap into is students, and their per-pupil funding, that are attending other schools.

In building a more equitable educational system in Michigan, our first priority should be to ensure that *every* school, regardless of setting, has the resources and support it needs. An important place to start is adequate funding for all schools. This study and others like it reveal that the vast majority of school districts, including even historically *advantaged* ones, are facing dire financial pressures (Delpier et al., 2019). It should come as no surprise that many districts have looked beyond their boundaries and used schools of choice to ease their financial pressures. Recent research by Arsen et al. (2019) demonstrates Michigan's lagging financial investment in its schools. Without a course correction, the most oppressed families and districts will continue to lose even more ground. Until these bare-minimum criteria for investment are met, disadvantaged school districts will always be less equipped to compete within a high-stakes educational market.

## Limitations

Like all research, this study carries some limitations. For instance, I did not produce any of the data that I analyze in this study. As with any document analysis, my findings are based entirely on already-existing information that I had no control over. In terms of newspaper articles and testimonial videos, I did not have control over the questions that participants were asked and in many cases do not know how interviewees were prompted to give their responses. This study is also limited by the information that was available at the time of data collection. Although I did my utmost to diligently collect pertinent materials available, it is likely that I did not find all of them. The Covid-19 pandemic also presented obstacles to data collection because I was limited to data that is publicly available and posted online. At the same time, my relative distance from

the production of this data is an asset. While my positionality and bias come to bear in my data analysis, that was not a factor in the production of data.

This study also bears important limitations in regard to generalizability. Kent ISD seems to be a unique case in the state of Michigan and therefore the US. There are many reasons to believe that the ways that dynamics play out in the ISD are quite similar to realities in other districts. At the same time, Kent ISD made collective choices early-on that likely impacted the development of the program in organic, unique ways. Therefore, we must be cautious in making generalizations, based on these findings, about other contexts.

### Further Research

There are many fruitful avenues for future research that stem from this study. Interviews with past and present Kent ISD officials would lend more insight into the development of the Kent Choice Program and the organization's goals in terms of access and equity for parents. Interviews with the leadership of participating district leaders would illuminate how they approach these issues as well. Comparisons with other ISDs across Michigan, including those that do and do not have regional choice agreements, would help us understand differences and commonalities across contexts. Perhaps most importantly, interviews with parents would give us important information about the demand side of the Kent Choice Program. I have discussed the many barriers that make choice participation difficult for many parents, particularly those from historically marginalized groups. Getting parent perspectives directly from parents themselves is key to understanding their experiences with schools of choice policy.

APPENDIX

**Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies: A Conceptual Framework**

As outlined in the table below, I conceptualize the connections between critical concerns (left column), the most salient parental engagement dynamics that play out through interdistrict school choice policy (center column), and some examples of how these concepts are manifest in my data (right column).

Table 27: *Critical Parental Engagement Policy Studies: A Conceptual Framework*

| Critical Concerns (from Diem & Young, 2015) | Parental Engagement Dynamics (from literature) | Examples (from data) |
|---|---|---|
| **1. Concern regarding the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality** | • Proponents claim policies will support equity for parents<br>• On the whole, policies actually tend to worsen inequities | • Despite equity rhetoric, many parents may not have access to the policy<br>• Tension between parent choice and protecting GRPS vs. district financial motivations |
| **2. Concern regarding the policy, its roots, and its development (context)** | • Historical and contemporary context of oppression in schools and educational policy<br>• Problematic parental engagement policy language | • Policy introduces competitive financial pressures in an already-complicated school funding environment<br>• Policymakers had little understanding of the consequences of policy for districts and parents |
| **3. Concern with the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge as well as the creation of policy "winners" and "losers"** | • Centering of the school<br>• Gatekeeping functions within schools and districts<br>• Logistical, social, and emotional barriers for parents<br>• Competitive forces hurt parents in districts that cannot compete | • Urban schools lose massive financial resources: "death spirals"<br>• Suburban schools get to try to fill to capacity<br>• Distribution of information only in English restricts access |
| **4. Concern regarding stratification and the broader effect a given policy has on relationships of inequality and privilege** | • Policy tends to benefit already-advantaged parents<br>• Reproduction and potential worsening of inequalities and inequities through policy | • Struggles facing urban schools become more concentrated<br>• MI's choice policy allows districts to reject students with disciplinary records |
| **5. Concern regarding the nature of resistance to or engagement in policy by members of non-dominant groups** | • Parents empowered by knowing their rights<br>• Parents actively advocate for their children | • Parents who do use the policy may feel empowered by choice<br>• Pushback from urban districts |

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**EPILOGUE: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES AT/ON A POLICY IMPASSE**

*We need much more than 'reform.' We need a* paradigm shift *in our concept of education.*

--Grace Lee Boggs (2012)

### Reflections on This Moment in Policy & the World

In closing this dissertation work, I feel compelled to reflect on the extraordinary circumstances that our world now faces. This work is indelibly marked by the social moment in which it was created. I have completed this dissertation during what has been, in many ways, a dark and difficult time for educators. We are just barely emerging from the oppressive weight of the four years of the Trump administration, and despite glimmers of hope for the near future, the damage will certainly take more than another four years to undo.

This moment is also steeped in a turbulent fight for racial justice in the United States. While the current struggles bear important marks of a continuing movement against anti-Black racism that has existed for hundreds of years, this is also a unique time that presents unique challenges and unique opportunities. At the same time, we face an economic crisis the likes of which this country has not seen for nearly eighty years. So many families face financial instability and uncertainty with no end in sight. As always, these hardships are affecting historically marginalized people the most, including people of color and people living in poverty. As a person dedicated to social justice-focused activism, these realities have provided me with even more motivation to conduct research that deepens our understanding of the oppressive forces embedded within policy and our society as a whole.

And of course, I have also undertaken much of this research during this stark, disturbing time of the Covid-19 pandemic. This global health event is nothing short of cinematic in scope.

And the ending of the story is still unwritten. The Covid-19 crisis has exposed the vulnerabilities of our society in unprecedented ways. By definition, it has exposed our interconnectedness as well. The deeply interpersonal nature of education showcases this mutual reliance. Folks across the country and indeed the world are now seeing what those of us who work in education have known for a long time: that schools are not just places where children learn. Schools are vital components of the social safety net. And importantly, folks are seeing the monumental consequences when schools are forced to close their physical doors. Some parents have the means to weather the challenges and uncertainties of disruptions to in-person learning. Other parents face far greater difficulties in meeting their children's basic needs.

We have all seen, and in many cases been a part of, the many inspiring and hopeful stories of communities coming together to provide for children's nutritional and educational needs in recent months. These monumental efforts show that incredible things are possible when dedicated educators, family members, and community members come together to support the wellbeing of students.

It is in that spirit that I have engaged in this work, attempting to mirror the strong sense of purpose and dedication of educators who have worked to support families in the extraordinary year of 2020. The complex relationships between parents and educators are perhaps more important now than ever before. Through my research, I explore the ways that policy may shape the nature of those relationships. I also examine how policies likely privilege more advantaged parents at the expense of marginalized parents. While many policies are aimed at promoting equity for disadvantaged groups, I argue that parental engagement policies, including schools of choice policies, are likely to actually perpetuate inequities in education. During this tumultuous moment for schools and families, this research provides valuable insight into the roles of policy

in school/parent relationships and provides avenues for further research on the implications of access and equity in policy.

## New Reflections on My Positionality in This Time & This Work

My ongoing practice of reflection on my positionality has been an important asset to me throughout my research, but it has taken on new significance in my research since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. The importance of this kind of reflection is deeply salient to the field of educational research, and the proliferation of this practice will be vital to the growth and evolution of educational policy research in particular. This global health crisis has exposed inequity and oppression in new ways, and engagement with these issues on a personal level is essential for anyone who wants to responsibly pursue research in education.

Over the last several months, I have found my thoughts regularly weaving in and out of my dissertation project, knitting together at the edges and sometimes at the center of the current events of our world. Importantly, I am actively and often uncomfortably wondering about my place in all of this and who I am in my work. I find myself in a dance between my vulnerabilities and my responsibilities. And now more than ever, I find myself thinking about the interplay among my past, present, and possible future.

Growing up in a working class home, my family knew what it was like to live paycheck to paycheck. Both of my parents worked multiple jobs during much of my childhood, but there were still times when our food and housing security were uncertain. Despite these obstacles, my parents were able to send me to a school where I flourished and experienced many opportunities. Importantly, I grew up free of major forces like systemic, racial oppression that have plagued marginalized people for centuries.

Today, my educational and professional success have brought even greater privilege into my life. While my own vulnerabilities have increased in some respects over the course of the pandemic, I am becoming more aware everyday of some new forms of privilege that are emerging for me. My ability to do my work is not complicated by responsibilities to care for loved ones. My income, housing, and food access are stable. I have reliable access to affordable, high-quality healthcare. Although these wealth inequalities have always existed, they are exacerbated and more widespread than they have been in decades. As someone whose work is rooted in access and equity issues in education, I now feel an even deeper sense of responsibility and motivation to rededicate myself to working toward justice in our society. For me, a vital part of that work is critically analyzing policy and considering how policy interventions—even well-intentioned ones—can actually perpetuate inequities.

## The Pandemic's Impact on My Work

Despite my relative safety and security in this moment, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic late in my dissertation process has still proven deeply influential in my work. This includes both my study designs and conceptual approaches. My early plans for my third paper centered on a case study design, focusing on partnering with a suburban public school district in Michigan that receives a large number of transfer students from a nearby urban district. My goal was to interview district leaders and parents about their experiences with schools of choice policy in order to learn about the access and equity issues involved in these processes. However, the rapid closing of Michigan's schools in March 2020 made such a study logistically and ethically impossible. Nearly overnight, school leaders needed to focus on supporting students, families, and personnel. Partnering with me in my project was simply too much to ask of the district at that time. I quickly determined that I needed to pursue another angle to better

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understand the challenges to access and equity embedded within the state's schools of choice laws.

A good deal of consultation with my dissertation committee and some internet research on district schools of choice policies led me to discover Kent ISD's School of Choice Plan. Despite graduating from a Grand Rapids public high school and researching schools of choice for several years, I had not previously known about this very consequential agreement. As I convey in my third paper, this agreement language and design has tremendous implications for access and equity within the educational policy environment of Kent ISD. More specifically, my research also reveals some potential impacts of Covid-19 on schools of choice in the region. Statewide lockdowns drove the ISD to limit availability of application options, and the necessary reduction of in-person interactions and school site visits between parents and educators present important barriers as well.

Despite the personal, logistical difficulties presented by the pandemic, my critical qualitative approach actually presented many tools that helped me pivot my research design. Additionally, my conceptual framework helped me stay nimble and continuously consider the access and equity implications of policy. CPA is deeply rooted in exploration of policy context. That conceptual approach, coupled with insights from critical parental engagement studies, allowed me to analyze the issues presented by the pandemic in a way that parallel my analysis of other challenges to access and equity for marginalized parents.

## Contributions to Educational Policy Research

My motivation in these studies is to investigate the challenges to access and equity embedded within parental engagement policy documents, including schools of choice policies in Michigan. These studies consider how policies may inform and regulate relationships among

parents and schools. I aim to explicitly expose and name racism, classism, xenophobia, ableism, and the centering of English-language texts in policy. I focus on these marginalized groups because the policies that I study specifically address them. Throughout this dissertation, I consider how numerous barriers may perpetuate the oppression of parents within these groups by restricting their access to parental engagement opportunities and ignoring some of the most essential roles that parents play in supporting their children.

These findings and my critical approach to this research topic provide important and innovative contributions, both to the study of different types of parental engagement policies and the field of educational policy research as a whole. This dissertation provides new ways of understanding parental engagement policies and schools of choice policies at the state and local levels. These understandings hinge on my use of a critical conceptual framework. Research on parental engagement policy is very limited, and although there is a body of research on schools of choice policies stretching back decades, very little of that research applies social theories or concepts, critical or otherwise. My research is part of what seems to be an emerging trend that includes work from researchers at Wayne State University and my research team at Michigan State University.

As Webster (2004) argues, before we work toward building more equitable policy and practice, we must first assess where those efforts stand right now. Through my research, I demonstrate that policy documents are far from equitable. Moving forward, building more equitable and accessible policies will require the inclusion of the voices of many stakeholders, with marginalized parents at the forefront.

My findings carry important implications for educational policy and research. As many scholars argue, policy language matters. Policies should center equity concerns and ensure that

opportunities for parental engagement are accessible to all parents. Without clear, precise

language that addresses historical and contemporary contexts of oppression, policies are likely to

perpetuate or even worsen inequities. The goals of policies need to be clear, and policy language

needs to reflect that.

At the same time, the development of more equitable policy faces many challenges. Until

under-resourced schools receive the support that we need to thrive, we must question whether

school choice is really much of a choice at all for many parents. And as my third study shows,

even districts that have historically been well-off are facing very difficult financial situations. It

is clear that very few schools have the necessary resources to give students the education they

deserve. That will require a major shift in how we think about investing in schools. Without that

shift, competitive pressures and the resulting inequities will persist.

## The Challenges & Compromises of Critical Policy Research

Critical policy research has opened for me some exciting avenues, but engaging in critical

research in the policy arena has come with challenges. Despite my strong belief in the important

contributions that critical frameworks and methodologies can make, I found a need to make

certain compromises during my research process. The conventional language of both policy and

policy research presented challenges to my conceptualization and writing. Educational policy

research is largely dominated by positivist and post-positivist approaches, what Diem et al.

(2014) call the traditional paradigm of policy research. Given this dominance, I sometimes opted

for language that is more strongly associated with the traditional paradigm than the critical

worldview. For instance, I leveraged trustworthiness approaches in each of my three studies.

While some may critique this framing as positivist and note the potential conflicts with the

critical worldview, I opt to use this term for the sake of using concepts and language that is readily accessible and understandable to policy scholars.

Another important language decision within this project involves terms regarding parental engagement. As I argue in my introduction section, schools have a legal and ethical responsibility to actively reach out to parents and work together to support the education of students. The term engagement does not necessarily describe well the nature of the work that schools do nor the ideal of forming authentic partnerships with parents. However, I opted to use this term for a couple of reasons. First, policy documents routinely use the term parental engagement to describe the working relationships between parents and schools. Second, policymakers, educators, and educational researchers are already accustomed to this term. On both counts, I opt for parental engagement because it is currently the common language of those involved in this work.

While further work pushing against this concept and verbiage would be welcome, that endeavor is beyond the scope of this set of research projects. Qualitative research, and particularly qualitative research, involves and even embraces a conceptual and methodological messiness. With that messiness come decision points like the ones that I have experienced in this set of projects. With more critical research permeating the field of educational policy research, my hope is that other scholars will engage in these difficult but essential research challenges and push on the boundaries of these terms and concepts.

### New Avenues for Critical Policy Research Approaches

Now, moving beyond this dissertation research, I offer some thoughts about not just the potential for future research but also the potential for a reimagining of educational policy that contributes to a more equitable, more just educational system. I propose these ideas, as Grace

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Lee Boggs urged us, to contribute not to just a project of reform but to a *paradigm shift* in our concept of education. I offer these ideas about educational policy from my small corner of the educational ecosystem.

These extraordinary times call for new and different policies, research approaches, and ways of understanding the historical and contemporary contexts of educational policy in the U.S. Critical research, such as CPA, can play an instrumental role in providing these news kinds of understandings. My research demonstrates some of these possibilities.

As I discuss above, positivist and post-positivist worldviews (and a focus on quantitative methodologies) have consistently dominated the field of educational policy research in recent years (Diem et al., 2014). However, these authors also argue that policy analysis has its roots in a deeply-nuanced, context-focused approach. In turn, they advocate for a return to these roots and an expansion of conceptual and methodological approaches.

Moreover, I believe that educational policy research is hungry for new approaches to understanding policy, including critical worldviews. Some signs suggest that the tide may be changing. The call for proposals for the Association for Education Finance and Policy conference in spring 2021 states that the organization is pivoting toward inviting more work that directly and explicitly addresses issues of power and oppression of marginalized groups in education. Further, they openly invite scholars to apply who take critical approaches to investigating educational policy. I take these steps as an indication that people are eager for new ways of thinking about educational policy and its implications for equity and justice in our society.

A paradigm shift in educational policy research will require not just an open-mindedness but also a deep commitment to inclusivity and the recognition of the expertise of all stakeholders

in the work of education. Critical research mandates an interrogation of power structures and their influence on social relationships. In order to engage in the work of education and educational research, all involved must prioritize understandings of historical and contemporary injustices, not just in educational practice but also educational policy and research. The US educational system is steeped in structural oppression, and building a more equitable system must begin with a reckoning.

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