Seeing Merit as a Vehicle for Opportunity and Equity: Youth Respond to School Choice Policy

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Abstract

School choice policy is ubiquitous in urban school districts. Evidence suggests that it has not fully delivered on its proponents' promises of equitable educational opportunity. While scholars and policymakers scrutinize data to determine school choice's equity outcomes, little attention has been paid to how school choice policy directly influences youth understanding of educational equity and opportunity. This study therefore explores how youth who engage with school choice policy come to understand and act upon the distribution of educational opportunities, and the extent to which their understandings and actions vary by social identity, family resources, school resources and admissions outcomes. 36 youth, engaged in the high school choice process, participated in this study, which is guided by policy enactment theory. Across subgroups, participants overwhelmingly valued merit as the best principle by which to distribute educational opportunity. Alongside this near-universal embrace of merit and widespread participation in choice policy-required actions, those who accessed the highest-performing schools often did so by activating non-academic resources that required financial capital. These findings highlight a shared ritual that serves to instantiate and reinforce ideals of meritocracy. Findings inform our discussion of school choice policy's educational equity and civic implications.

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Introduction

School choice policy—in which students and their parents select from schooling options made available by local and state educational authorities—was introduced and promoted with grand promises. These included an array of public schooling options beyond more conventional attendance boundaries, reduced racial isolation of students, a weakened relationship between family income, neighborhood characteristics and educational opportunities, and a greater sense of parent and student agency over the schooling process (Archbald 2004; Betts and Loveless 2005; Fuller 2002). School choice was framed as a panacea for the perceived failure of public education, imbued with "the capacity all by itself to bring about the kind of transformation that, for years, reformers have been seeking to engineer in a myriad other ways" (Chubb and Moe 1990, p. 217). This "panacea" was also expected to reverse decades of "white flight" and cities' consequent loss of educational resources (Donnor 2012), in turn encouraging white, middle-class families to stay in cities and choose urban public schools (Jordan and Gallagher 2015). School choice seems to offer something for everyone.

Educational equity is described as another potential benefit of school choice. In cities marked by neighborhood and school segregation (such as Milwaukee, Philadelphia, New York and Chicago), academically selective, open-boundary public high schools often enroll their district's most racially and socioeconomically diverse student bodies, projecting an image of school choice as atypically inclusive. These schools admit students on the basis of their academic performance, offering rigorous opportunities within cities with relatively large numbers of underperforming schools (Reeves and Schobert 2019). As such, school choice speaks to Americans' belief in education as a vehicle of social opportunity with the potential to tip the figurative scales toward equity (McCall 2013). Students can select, rather than be forced into, schools, while those perceived as the most promising can pursue enriched opportunities otherwise unavailable to them.

Yet, evidence suggests that school choice policy has equity problems. Outcome studies show an overrepresentation of socially and economically privileged students in high performing schools, while lower-performing schools are overwhelmingly segregated and attended by students of color (Gold et al. 2010; Reardon 2012; Reeves and Schobert 2019; Sattin-Bajaj 2014). While the idea of choice connotes opportunity, this vision has not produced equitable learning opportunities for lower-income, Black and Latinx students, and has in some instances exacerbated racial and economic segregation (Renzulli and Evans 2005; Saporito 2003). Stakeholders at all levels have contested the very idea that school choice is "better" for racially and socially marginalized students (Scott 2011). Nevertheless, urban districts continue to position choice policies as a route to expanded educational opportunity (Burke et al. 2013).

As we grapple with how, or even whether, school choice policy provides equitable educational opportunity, young people who live out school choice navigate and make sense of it daily. School choice teaches young people in situ about what equity and opportunity mean, and about these ideas' value in their daily

lives (Anyon 2014). Levinson (2012, p. 174) describes these lessons aptly, stating that "all schools teach experiential lessons about civic identity, expectations and opportunities—even when they have no intention of doing so." We can learn more about the relationship between school choice, equity, and opportunity, by inquiring about how students who live out school choice form their own understandings of equity and opportunity.

As such, this study investigates the experiences of a diverse group of students selecting their high schools in Chicago, a city that offers over 130 public schooling options including academically selective schools, charter schools, specialty schools (such as arts and military schools) in addition to a range of independent and parochial private schools. Key to our findings, a number of these options were selective since more students applied than schools could accommodate. We asked:

- How do youth who engage with school choice policy come to understand and act upon the distribution of educational opportunities?
- To what extent do their understandings and actions vary by social identity, family resources, school resources or admissions outcomes?

Youth participants overwhelmingly demonstrated a valuation of merit as the best principle by which to distribute educational opportunity. Across participant subgroups, they embraced and defended merit regardless of which high schools admitted them or what types of resources they activated during the choice process. Alongside this near-universal embrace of merit, those who accessed the highest-performing schools often did so by activating non-academic resources—primarily family members' financial resources, human capital and time. We therefore concluded that school choice policy, when it includes schools with selective criteria, engages students in a shared ritual that serves to instantiate and reinforce ideals of meritocracy.

This article continues with a description of the concepts that framed our inquiry: policy enactment theory, which focused our attention on how young people engaged with the principles of equity, equality and merit as they pursued educational opportunity via school choice policy. This framework directed our inquiry, which we describe from district, site and participant selection through the collaborative data analysis that produced our results. Our findings section elaborates upon the dimensions of school choice policy enactment that illustrate participants' belief in merit as rightly determinative of equitable educational opportunity distribution, and the ritual of meritocracy in which we saw them engage. From these findings, we draw implications for school choice and equity, and for school choice as a civic experience.

Conceptual Framework: Ideas About Opportunity Distribution and How Youth Enact Them

Our framework bridges together adults' ideas about opportunity distribution with how youth come to understand ideas about policy through policy enactment. Policymakers, educators and citizens debate and carry out ideas about how educational

opportunities ought to be distributed. Equity, equality, and merit emerge from these conversations, and are all relevant to students' pursuit of educational opportunity through school choice.

The terms "equality" and "equity" are used frequently and often conflated when it comes to educational resource distribution. The notion of equality is one of sameness or equivalence; equity concerns fairness. The widely repeated phrase, "Fair isn't always equal"—used in estate planning guidance materials, sermons, and parenting advice articles—evokes this distinction. While the superficial meanings of these terms are clear, their meanings-in-use remain contested.

Scholars advocate for both equity and equality, in different forms, when considering how we distribute educational opportunities and resources. Seeing gifted students as already equipped for success, Baker (2001) argued that more disadvantaged students should receive a larger share of educational resources. Mazie (2009, p. 15) challenges "blindfolded" meritocracy that "turns a blind eye to the socioeconomic circumstances" people face, suggesting that a strictly equal division of educational resources is not just. Others advocate equality in educational resource distribution. Asserting the state's obligation to prepare all students to be academically and vocationally competitive, Koski and Reich (2007) decried unequal per-pupil spending across school districts, a call echoed by many policy scholars (e.g., Darling-Hammond 2010). Rawls (2001) asserted that extant inequalities between individuals are unavoidable and that, therefore, a more just approach would provide more resources to those experiencing societal disadvantage.

Clarity about equity and equality, and the relationships between these two concepts, evades us. As but one example, Anderson (1999) asserted that individuals should have access to an equal "distribution of divisible resources," with the consideration that "everyone have effective access to enough resources to avoid being oppressed by others and to function as an equal in civil society" (p. 320). Her vision for "democratic equality" would likely necessitate an unequal distribution of resources, evoking equity that would lead to equality. Deliberations like these about equity and equality present competing, unresolved visions, with none particularly predominant in existing policy. A few states provide compensatory funding to make up for low property tax revenue (Chingos and Blagg 2017), while others have enacted progressive funding, granting greater per-pupil funding to higher-poverty districts.

Merit is also put forward as a means for determining the distribution of educational opportunity, at times serving to justify unequal and inequitable distribution. Understood as the combination of one's ability and effort (Lemann 1999), merit is widely embraced as a central American value, seen by many as a "practical and moral necessity" (Markovits 2019, p. 259). Meritocratic ideology has its critics, yet has surged in recent years, as a central tenet of neoliberal education policies. These policies promote access to opportunity through unregulated markets, rather than through state redistribution of wealth and universal, public supports and services (Duggan 2003). In so doing, the market is seen as creating "opportunities for all to prosper" (Leyva 2009, p. 369) and rewarding those who ostensibly work hard, choose well within markets, and outperform their peers (Dean 2010; Harvey 2007). Merit ideology manifests in policies that require testing with high stakes for students and teachers (Au et al. 2016), and the

closure of under-performing or under-enrolled schools (e.g., Shiller 2018). From this perspective, educational opportunity must be earned: students must merit academic promotion and opportunity, educators must merit continued employment, and schools must merit district and state support.

While adults argue and reason about how to best distribute educational opportunities, students live the realities of opportunity distribution. Evidence of students critiquing and resisting current arrangements—student protests in response to school closings in Chicago (Ewing 2018) and student challenges of New York City's persistent school segregation (Veiga 2019)—show that students do consider the nature of their educational opportunities. To focus our attention on how students come to understand and act upon educational opportunity distribution, we also engaged policy enactment theory (Ball et al. 2012) in this study's framework. Policy enactment theory holds that individuals figure out policy through interpretation, talk and action, and that the enactment process is shaped by actors' contexts. This theory typically supports actor-focused analysis of how policy unfolds. The present study extends policy enactment theory, using it to examine how students come to understand the phenomena that policies concern, and how context shapes those understandings. In this case, the policy "content" of concern is that which determines the distribution of educational opportunities under school choice policy.

Research Questions and Methodology

To learn how young people come to understand, draw conclusions about, and respond to educational opportunity distribution, we explored their engagement with school choice policy in a police space where they had access to schools of varying perceived quality. Accordingly, this study pursues the following research questions: First, how do youth who engage with school choice policy come to understand and act upon the distribution of educational opportunities? Second, exploring the roles of context and identity, we asked: To what extent do their understandings and actions vary by social identity, family resources, school resources or admissions outcomes?

These questions drove our comparative, longitudinal case study of young people enacting the high school choice process in Chicago. This study design enabled us to compare participants across subgroups and school sites, and thereby to see the influence of individual characteristics and school context, incorporate different forms of evidence, and observe policy enactment over time (Yin and Campbell 2018). We drew data from a larger study of competitive school choice policy conducted by the lead author (Phillippo and Griffin 2016; Phillippo 2019), where the theme of youth understanding of educational opportunity distribution emerged but was neither central nor fully explored.

Study Sites and Participants

This study took place within Chicago Public Schools (CPS), which offers youth access to over 130 high schools, ranging from nationally ranked schools to those

on the brink of closure. Chicago has long been a city of ethnic enclaves (Pacyga 2009), with many of its schools shaped by stubborn neighborhood racial segregation (Danns 2014; Ewing 2018) and, more recently, growing income inequality (Berube and Holmes 2015). These factors contributed to drastic differences in formal and informal resources available to individual schools, as well as perceived and actual school quality (Lipman 2011; Posey-Maddox 2016). Students' access to educational opportunity, therefore, was highly variable.

One CPS department processed high school applications and sent out admissions notices. Every Chicago student had access to a designated open-enrollment, neighborhood high school. However, the majority of CPS high school students attends school outside of their neighborhood, including military, magnet, charter, arts, International Baccalaureate (IB), and selective-enrollment high schools (SEHS), many of which are academically selective (Ali and Watson 2017). Nearly 17,000 students competed for 3000 SEHS spots the year this study's participants applied (Cox 2014). SEHS admissions requirements changed after CPS was released from court supervision of its desegregation efforts in 2009. SEHS admissions portfolios then consisted of seventh-grade core course grades, standardized test scores, and a high school entrance exam score (CPS 2011, 2013). CPS also required SEHS to admit equal numbers of students from each of four designated socioeconomic tiers for 65% of open seats.[1] SEHS therefore admitted each tier's highest performing applicants. 30% of open SEHS spots went to the highest-scoring applicants, regardless of socioeconomic tier. Schools' principals had discretion over the remaining 5% of seats, through a process with its own set of eligibility criteria. SEHS applicants had to obtain a minimum score (at approximately the 40th percentile) on seventh-grade standardized tests. Other CPS schools requirements, less stringent, included open house attendance, essays and interviews.

Youth study participants attended "Forrester" or "Vista," two purposefully sampled schools. We sought two open-enrollment, neighborhood K-8 schools with similar performance ratings (the highest of three levels used by CPS at the time), comparable public transportation access, and contrasting free- and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) rates (above 90% and below 40%). These criteria were used to hold constant academic performance and transportation so that these factors would not confound findings about the school choice process. Forrester and Vista had contrasting student FRPL eligibility rates (94% vs. 22%, respectively). Forrester, situated in an unevenly gentrifying neighborhood, exceeded CPS's average FRPL rate (85%); Vista fell far below it. Each school's enrollment was atypically racially and socioeconomically diverse for CPS schools, most of which are racially and socio-economically homogeneous (see Table 1).

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[1] CPS uses U.S. Census data, divides all tracts in Chicago equally into four socioeconomic tiers. Data used to rank each census tract are: median family income, adult educational attainment, percentage of single-parent households, percentage of home-ownership, percentage of the population that speaks a language other than English, and a school performance variable calculated from the tract's schools' standardized test scores. CPS identified students' socioeconomic tiers according to the address listed on their high school application.

Table 1 Participating K-8 school and CPS demographic information, 2013-2014 school year

	Forrester	Vista	CPS
Free- or reduced-price lunch eligible	94%	22%	85%
Largest racial/ethnic groups	Asian (37%)	White (60%)	Latino (45%)
	Latino (32%)	Latino (20%)	Black (40%)
	Black (24%)	Black (10%)	White (9%)
English language-learners	42%	10%	16%

Table 2 Study participants: demographic information (N=36)

	Forrester	Vista
Free- or reduced-price lunch eligible	16	7
African-American and/or African	3	4
Asian/Pacific Islander	9	1
Latinxo	3	2
White	2	7
Mixed race	1	4

Our team recruited participants through in-class presentations about the study. From the 67 students who volunteered to participate, we randomly selected 18 per school (balanced only by self-reported gender) to participate in exchange for $50 in gift cards, paid incrementally over the study's duration. Our multi-level sampling process produced a participant group with substantial socioeconomic, racial, ethnic and academic diversity (see Table 2). Each school's participants included students who did and did not qualify to take the SEHS entrance exam. Varying intersections of race, SES and ethnicity among participants led to our sample including students of differing socioeconomic status across racial and ethnic groups.

Data

Our data combine interviews with observations of high school choice-related events. Research team members interviewed participants three times apiece: during the application process, after admissions notification by CPS, and during their first year of high school. These semi-structured, individual interviews explored 1) what participants thought of CPS high school choice policy; 2) their understanding of the purpose of public schools and selective-enrollment high schools (SEHS); 3) their preferred high schools and rationale; 4) schools to which they applied, were admitted, and where they enrolled 5) what they did to access high schools before and after receiving admission notice; and 6) their reactions to their own and peers' admission results. Interviews took place at participants' choice of a private space at their school, home, or public location (e.g., public library meeting room). We did not interview parents or caregivers since our study focuses on student understandings and actions, but did elicit extensive information from youth about family members' involvement in the high school choice process.

Additional forms of data provided triangulating evidence. We conducted 58 observations of Forrester's and Vista's eighth-grade classrooms and all high school admissions-related events (e.g. group advising sessions, high school fair). We also observed student participants' individual high school admissions guidance sessions at Vista (Forrester did not provide such sessions). The observation protocol focused on verbal and nonverbal communication related to high school choice, along with evidence of economic and noneconomic resources that seemed pertinent to students' choicemaking.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

To analyze the data set, the lead author convened a generationally, professionally and racially diverse research team with various experiences in urban high schools as students, parents and/or educators. Three of five members did not collect the study's data, and so did not know the sites' identities and were minimally familiar with the larger study's findings. This arrangement enhanced the data analysis process' trustworthiness, since new team members implicitly and explicitly challenged longer-standing members' assumptions about the data's meanings.

The research team began data analysis by reading interview and observational data, already coded from the broader study, that pertained to the present study's research questions (e.g., participant perceptions of fairness, actions during admissions process). Through team meetings and analytic memos (Emerson et al. 2011), the team identified themes and categorized different expressions of those themes. For example, through analysis of data pertinent to the actions participants took, we identified lower-intensity (e.g., review district materials) and higher-intensity (e.g., take private test preparation classes) actions and categorized each participant by their actions' intensity level. We examined themes across the study's duration, to see whether participants' understandings or actions changed over the course of the admissions process. We compared findings and tested analytic propositions by applying them across different participant subgroups (K-8 school, self-identified race and gender, FRPL eligibility, and admitting high school type). Members also reviewed one another's successive findings section drafts. Data trustworthiness was furthered by our operation as research team with a diverse constitution in relation to urban high school choice, our use of multiple forms of data, and team members' sustained, intensive interaction with early drafts of our findings.

Findings: Embracing Merit, Enacting a Ritual of Meritocracy

Throughout their enactment of high school choice, youth participants insisted that merit did and should drive high school admissions. As they took the prescribed steps of high school research, application and admission, participants approached citywide school choice as a legitimate, universal process that sorted students into the correct schools according to their demonstrated merit. At the same time, a smaller group of participants engaged school choice policy differently. This more affluent subgroup

of students activated available human and economic capital in order to beat out their peers for access to the city's highest-performing public schools. These additional actions did not involve merit gained through in-school activities. Instead, activities like test preparation courses, audition coaching and parent-led, capital-fueled applications and appeals created a credible appearance of greater merit. Because participants who deployed such resources could augment their performance of merit, their access to high-performing schools appeared valid in their own and others' eyes.

Below, we elaborate upon the ritual of meritocracy that our inquiry illuminated. We begin by describing participants' understanding of schools—both Chicago's public schools in general and also its selective-enrollment public schools—as institutions whose purpose is to advance individuals, particularly those who demonstrate merit. Participants widely valued schools as strategically useful, and merit as essential strategic currency. These valuations reappeared in participants' opinions about how high school seats ought to be distributed. They consistently preferred merit over equity or equality as the principle by which to best distribute educational opportunities, regardless of their individual admissions outcomes. We then describe the two-level meritocracy ritual that we observed. The first level emphasized admissions policy knowledge and compliance, and was understood by participants as inclusive of all students. Participants' "first-level" policy activity reflects modestly differing amounts of effort to secure a preferred high school seat. However, our subsequent discussion of "second-level" activity, which existed outside of formal school choice policy space, demonstrates how gross inequities were widened and naturalized among participants.

The Perceived Purpose of Schooling: Individual Advancement and Development

Participants' embrace of merit first became visible to us through their discussion of their own schools and the purposes they served. They saw schools as places that helped them as individuals. They considered academically selective public schools places that gave more to students who demonstrated more merit, providing "better" opportunities for "smart" kids.

Public Schools: Baseline Opportunities

Participants voiced multiple understandings of the purpose of public school. These primarily concerned individual advancement rather than the improvement of society. They perceived purposes including (in descending order of frequency; see Fig. 1): a free alternative to private school, equal opportunity promotion, the improvement of society, diversity creation, and preparation for individual success. Of those who perceived more than one purpose (53%), over half, like Isaac, spoke of public schools as a free alternative and as a means for individuals to prepare for future success. "Since they're free," he explained, "They help kids who like me who want to go to a private school… get an education, when they don't have to pay." Oliver saw public schools as a resource for whole families: "The government is running these schools
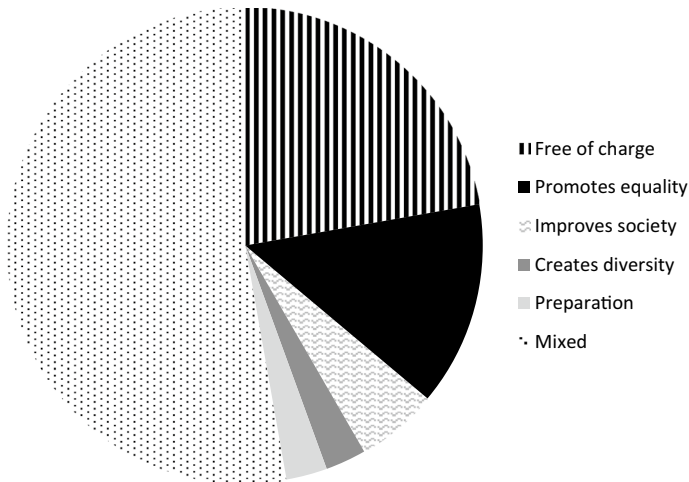
Fig. 1 Purpose and value of public education, as described by youth participants

so that foreign parents can like drop their children off… so they can be successful and not live off welfare or anything like that."

Youth participants' comments less frequently mentioned community or equality. Leah stressed that "Public schools make the world a better place because it improves the education. Helps you find a better job in society." A small group of participants—all of whom identified as female, students of color and/or LGBTQ—stressed that public schools expose students to diverse peers. Aatirah explained, "With public schools you're able to see different people's views. In private schools… you don't really get to see other people's views or how other people grew up."

Participants valued equal opportunity, but for the purpose of individual advancement rather than that of strengthening society. Eden (part of a lower income household) equated equal opportunity with a chance to improve one's life circumstances, contending that "anyone who wants to get out of their position in life and to a better one, if they want to achieve the better situation then they deserve the chance." These comments weren't about equal opportunity as a valued social principle, but rather something that would benefit individuals. Participants said very little about the collective societal benefits of public education.

Selective-Enrollment High Schools: "Better" Opportunities for "smart" Students

Overwhelmingly, participants said that the purpose of selective enrollment high schools (SEHS) was to benefit students who were already performing well. Purposes they perceived for SEHS (see Fig. 2), include: college and career preparation, to provide more learning opportunities, and to serve "smarter," more advanced students. A few participants saw SEHS as the same as other schools. Many saw SEHS as "better" because the students were "smarter." Amani, ultimately admitted to an SEHS, explained, "(SEHS) students have a higher level of knowledge." Oliver described SEHS as both a reward and a boost: "You have to put effort into school to actually
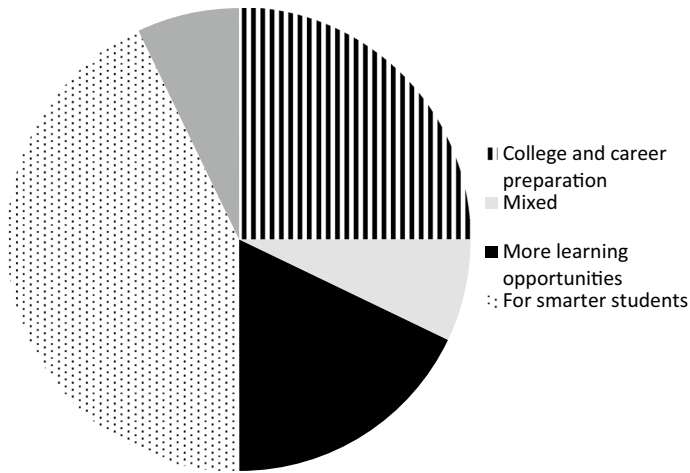
Fig. 2 Purpose and value of selective enrollment high schools, as described by youth participants

get into these higher up schools so you can be successful in life and not fail." Few students referred to SEHS' societal benefits. Jennifer described their purpose as producing civic leaders who would give back to Chicago, but then reverted to SEHS' individual benefit, explaining, "because some kids want to be challenged. They also want to have a jump start in what they want to have for a career."

Youth Understanding of Opportunity Distribution: Fairness through Merit

Merit also pervaded participants' comments about how educational opportunities were (and ought to be) distributed via school choice and admissions policies. Throughout the high school application process, they saw CPS's policies for distributing educational opportunities as fair, even if they disliked their own experiences of it. While their views varied to an extent, most felt that the fairest way to distribute opportunities to attend preferred high schools was by student merit, and that the system in place was at least somewhat fair.

Conceptions of Fair Opportunity Distribution Centered Around Merit

Participants described three types of fair opportunity distribution: fairness as equity, fairness as merit-based, and fairness as strict equality. Those who defined fairness as equity did so in a way consistent with our discussion of equity above, in that fairness came to pass when adjustments were made for those at a disadvantage, so that all students could have comparable access to the same resources. Aaron's explanation summarizes this understanding:

> People that don't have really a lot of money… should get a boost because not everybody has what they really want. Mostly rich kids, they have a bet-
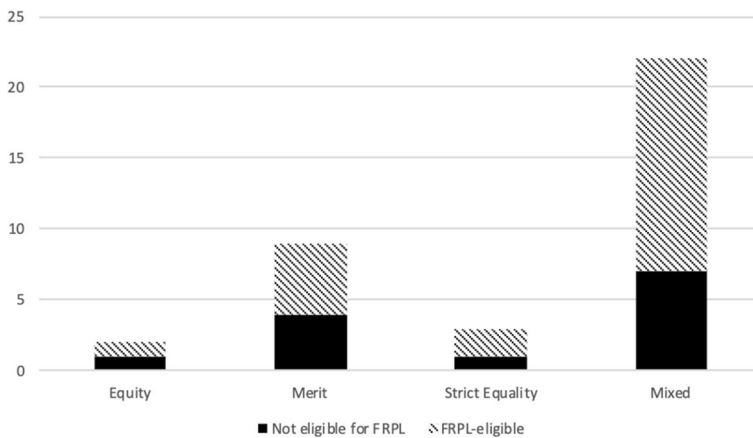
Fig. 3 Participant definitions of the fair distribution of educational opportunities, sorted by thematic categories and participants' free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) eligibility status (n = 36)

ter advantage to get into different schools that they want because they have money, of course.

Other participants saw fairness as rooted in merit, feeling that while anyone should have an opportunity to pursue a spot at any high school, the highest-performing students should receive priority. Elijah explained, "I think it's fair that if a student has all A's and he joins a club and joins the band and do all that stuff, he should be accepted into a high school he wants to get into." This understanding cut both ways, as he continued: "But (if) they're not doing anything, not trying their best and cutting back on their schoolwork, then they shouldn't (be accepted)."

From this perspective, fairness would reward effort and punish negligence. A third group of participants defined fairness as strict equality toward all students, with all students receiving the same instruction and within-school opportunities. "Why couldn't everybody just learn together and learn the same thing?" Davea asked, rhetorically, to make this point.

The distribution of participants' views of fairness tended definitively toward merit-based, both in terms of responses with one clear focus and those that mixed more than one definition (see Fig. 3). Of 36 participants, two voiced a preference for fairness as equity, nine for fairness as merit-based, and three for fairness as strict equality. Twenty-two provided mixed definitions.

All mixed responses included at least a partial emphasis on merit. For example, when discussing whether CPS distributed high school seats fairly, Simeon characterized current practice as "pretty fair but also unfair," elaborating:

For the kids who do work hard in their classes and on their test scores, get good grades, all that stuff, it's fair to them that they get that separate education, I guess you could say, with selective enrollment (schools). But it's also unfair for certain kids because, say they did get good scores, good grades but they

messed up on the test, it's just one test and I don't think you can really decide a person's knowledge based off of one test.

Simeon's definition of fair opportunity distribution characterizes it as both merit- and equity-driven, with his concern for adjusting opportunities for individual circumstances. 55% of participants with mixed definitions voiced a mixed preference for merit and equity. 45% defined fairness in terms that blended merit and strict equality. Marisol defined fairness in this way:

Selective enrollment ones (schools), they're fair because it measures the (student's) knowledge since those are high ranked schools. But at the same time I feel it's wrong because everyone deserves to have a good education and they shouldn't be putting tests on that… to only choose certain people.

While more than half of participants shared mixed definitions of fair opportunity distribution, none combined notions of strict equality and equity. Only five of thirty-six participants did not include merit anywhere in their definition of the fair distribution of high school seats.

Definitions of fair distribution varied somewhat across participant subgroups. Definition distributions were similar across both K-8 schools, and more males than females (a two-to-one ratio) emphasized merit. While definitions were similarly distributed across income groups, a larger share of lower-income participants (68%) shared mixed definitions. Nine of ten participants who saw fairness as both merit- and strict equality-driven were eligible for FRPL. All those admitted to the most selective schools all emphasized either merit or mixed merit and equity in their responses. In contrast, participants either rejected by all of their preferred schools, or who enrolled in a nonselective school—a group comprised almost entirely of lower-income students of color (17 of 20)—emphasized merit or a mix of merit and strict equality.

Resigned Acceptance of a Merit Rationale

Even though participants generally described their high school admissions process as fair, they often did so in a manner that was resigned rather than affirmative. Participants not admitted to their preferred schools were dismayed, but ultimately accepted the admissions process as fair. Even though he applied to multiple selective-enrollment high schools (SEHS), all of which rejected him, Rafeeq thought he ended up where he belonged. He felt that he had a choice in where he attended school, describing the schools that rejected him as "probably for people who are little more advanced… who are, like, motivated, work harder." When asked how he felt about not attending his preferred schools, he responded, "(At first) I felt it was kind of bad but like later on, I got used to Rey." In the end, he described CPS's high school admissions process as fair, although he disliked its clause that equally distributed a portion of open seats at SEHS across four socioeconomic tiers.

Those admitted to their preferred schools voiced similar resigned acceptance of high school admissions policies. Lee, admitted to her preferred high school, said of the process: "It's really hard to make it totally fair for everybody because everybody

has different definitions of fair. But for the most part I don't think CPS does too bad of a job." When asked about how students at other schools across the city would access educational opportunities, she replied, "I can hope." Rafeeq, Lee and most participants only critiqued the existing admissions policy in that they felt it was not merit-based enough.

Enacting School Choice: Academic and Non-Academic Effort

Youth participants' embrace of meritocratic ideologies carried through to the actions they took as they sought out high school opportunities. The majority engaged in what we see as the first level of the meritocracy ritual, in which they undertook efforts to qualify for and gain admission to schools of their choice. In keeping with formal high school choice policy, they attempted to meet admissions requirements through their own academic performance. A smaller group of individuals with access to school choice-relevant cultural, human and economic capital (Sattin-Bajaj 2014) also engaged in a second level of the meritocracy ritual, outside the formal policy space of school-measured academic performance. Through these actions, this group of participants aimed to enhance their admissions odds.

Academic Effort: Merit on Paper

Youth pursued seats at high schools through policy-established channels of research, application and submission. They believed that they participated in a universal process to which all of their peers were equally subject. Participants from all demographic and admissions results subgroups attended high school open houses, completed high school applications, and talked with their K-8 educators to get assistance with applications. At this level, academic effort to gain admission to a preferred high school involved performing well in seventh-grade core courses, on the seventh-grade state standardized tests, and on CPS' high school entrance exam. Some participants regretted what they saw as their lack of effort, yet they still saw their grades and test scores as a fair indicator of their suitability for different high schools. Anna was pleased with the program that admitted her, but described the program as her "second choice." She credited her results to not working as hard as she could have in seventh grade, explaining, "If I really, really wanted to do well I would have pushed myself." Similarly, Akin said he would advise younger students to work hard, stressing that "they should do good now so to have a choice later of what high school they could go to."

An emphasis on academic effort permeated these activities. Youth participants' attribution of their own and others' limited access to preferred schools to a lack of academic effort and merit began when they received letters indicating the types of schools to which they were eligible to apply. When CPS sent letters to all eighth-graders informing them of their eligibility to apply to different high school programs, six participants received letters indicating that they were not eligible to apply to SEHS. Pham, a recent immigrant to the United States, matter-of-factly attributed his ineligibility to his low proficiency in English. Similarly, students who were

deemed eligible to apply to SEHS felt they had earned that status. At the end of the admissions process, participants concluded that those rejected by their preferred schools had simply performed more poorly than their peers did. Samuél described more exclusive public schools as able to "choose the people who deserve to get in and not just let anyone in," and went on to describe his rejection from his preferred school, Osborne, as fair. When Osborne admitted Samuél's friend, he provided a rationale of merit and effort: "She is smarter than me, put more effort in, I think she really deserves it more than I do." Participants discussed access to preferred high schools as an unexciting, logical and universal matter of academic merit, "more based on the students themselves," as Anna put it.

While recognizing that resources varied by family, school and neighborhood, participants overwhelmingly believed that academic effort would, above all, land them and others in a "good" high school. They consistently attributed positive academic qualities to students—including those they did not know—who were admitted to highly selective high schools. They also viewed students at less selective high schools as students who performed poorly and made minimal effort. Whether participants were eligible or ineligible to test for admissions to SEHS, both groups described students in those schools positively, saying that they are "hard-working," "more capable" and that they "care about learning." In contrast, 87.5 percent of exam-eligible participants, and one-third of ineligible participants, described nonselective, neighborhood schools' students negatively: as people who "goof around in school," "don't care about school," and "don't put forth effort." A desired, mediocre or unwanted high school placement, by participants' reckoning, was the direct, fair result of one's academic effort and achievement.

Extracurricular Effort: Attempts to Appear *more* Meritorious

Even as eighth-graders across Chicago shared the experience of policy-driven high school choice and admission, a smaller group of participants engaged in additional admissions efforts outside of the formal school choice policy space. These largely private-market activities comprised a second level meritocracy ritual, and legitimated—to those who engaged in the activities and even to students who did not—racially and socioeconomically skewed admissions results.

A smaller, disproportionately white and affluent group of study participants engaged in extensive, numerous out-of-school activities such as fee-based courses to prepare them for the high school entrance exam and seventh-grade standardized tests, and private lessons for the purpose of fine arts program audition preparation (see Table 3). This same group used their parents' human and social capital to schedule and make private school visits, complete high school applications, and appeal rejections. Raphael, for example, applied to multiple CPS and private high schools. His parents helped him create a resume and fill out applications, brought him to open houses and private school shadow days, and paid for two test prep courses. Paul's mother gathered the materials used to appeal his rejection by a highly selective school. Her assembly of certificates that documented private sports team and musical accomplishments (the products of Paul's costly extracurricular experiences) resulted in an successful appeal. Participants in this group got practice

Table 3 High school admissions-related levels of activity, before and after admissions notification (n = 36)

	Examples of activities (for one participant each)	Percent eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch (%)	Percent students of color (%)
Low 16 participants	Got assistance from teachers to fill out applications; looked at school websites	94	94
Moderate 12 participants	Mother visited schools during school search phase; researched schools on internet; asked friends about high schools; attended before-school advising, asked teachers about CPS website and other schools; used high school guide; applied to multiple high schools; worked with English speaking staff at organization that serves immigrant families to get more help completing applications	58	79
High 8 participants	Visits to high schools with parent; took private test preparation course (for seventh grade standardized tests and for high school entrance exam); attended high school fair; met individually with school counselor; parent set up shadow day at local private school; parent contacted out-of-state private school; applied to multiple public and private schools; filed admissions appeal; family relocated to support private school attendance outside of Chicago	13	50

in test prep courses with the entrance exam format, timing, and other requirements (such as a ban on calculators), prepared with professional coaches for auditions, and applied to "backup" private schools.

Meanwhile, students with less access to admissions-relevant capital had reduced opportunities to do these types of extracurricular "work." Marisol took the same entrance exam, but without any private preparation. "I did study hard for it," Marisol said of the exam. She became flustered by the test site's large auditorium, and by "questions on different sections (that) are timed so the time kind of made me rush." Ime encountered material on the test he'd never learned before. Gerardo auditioned for fine arts programs, but received no coaching beforehand, and was not admitted. Aatirah appealed her SEHS rejection, but did so with no adult help and was unsuccessful. Forrester participants, all but two of whom belonged to lower-income families, were surprised to learn that fee-based test prep courses were even offered in Chicago, and none enrolled. Rather, they shared access to one copy of one of their teachers' outdated test preparation course books. They took turns using it before and after school, and used their phones to take photos of relevant pages. Amani got to keep the book for one day, and found it somewhat helpful, explaining, "it kind of gave us an idea of what the test would be like." However, she didn't have the book long enough to digest the information. She elaborated that "the words that were listed, most of the things were really new. I didn't expect them to come on the test."

The combination of academic and out-of-sight, extracurricular effort created a situation in which students believed that admissions results were fully and rightly driven by student merit. In many instances, however, these supposedly merit-driven results followed activity outside of the classroom that individuals explicitly expected to boost their own measured academic merit. Participants, though, did not see these beyond-policy acts, as duplicitous. Rather, the two blurred together as a reflection of individual merit. Even Samuél, who did not have the opportunity to take test prep courses, defended others who did. Describing a hypothetical student who attended a private test-prep course and got into a high performing school, he said that person "actually put effort into it; he deserved to get into the school." Ironically, those who engaged in non-academic efforts to obtain seats at preferred high schools were among the most ardent defenders of a merit-driven distribution of academic opportunities. Cal, whom a SEHS admitted (and who took test prep courses), believes that he got what he deserved because he "worked very hard for it." He justified his outcome, comparing his effort to lower-income students, who in his eyes received an undue benefit from the tier system. He explained that students in lower-income tiers

> really don't have to do as much work; they can maybe get C's on their report card and maybe still get into a really good school. I think it's unfair that students here (Vista) have to try really hard where students that live in a lower tier don't have to succeed as much to get into certain schools.

Students like Cal perhaps worked "harder" in the sense that they did more than other peers, but their activities were was unavoidably connected to social and economic privilege, not universally available, and occurred outside of formal policy and school-directed learning.

Admissions Results: Divergent Outcomes of a Supposedly Shared Ritual

Youth participants believed ardently that merit did and should guide the high school admissions process, and then encountered admissions results that suggested that students of privilege were simply more meritorious. Admissions outcomes varied most clearly along lines of socioeconomic status, race, K-8 school and level of high school admissions-related activity (see Table 4). Participants who received offers from their preferred schools (all of which were selective to an extent)—44% of our sample—were disproportionately white, and ineligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Participants admitted to neither SEHS, their preferred schools, nor for some, any school at all, were, as a group, disproportionately lower-income students of color.

Admissions results did differ to an extent across participants' K-8 schools, but this difference seems a function of school demographics rather than of schools' differing approaches to high school choice guidance. At Forrester, a school where 94% of students qualified for free- or reduced-price lunch, and where 78% of study participants qualified to apply to SEHS admissions, only 17% of participants were admitted to a SEHS. In contrast, 22% of Vista students qualified for free- or reduced-price lunch (FRPL), with 89% of participants eligible for SEHS admission, and 39% study participants were admitted to a SEHS, with an additional 28% admitted to other preferred schools. We attribute this discrepancy at least in part to Vista students' higher socioeconomic status. They were much more often able to operate outside of formal policy spaces to access their preferred schools. Vista students' access to resources culminated in more expansive school choices for a wealthier and whiter subsection of students, quietly but bluntly challenging the narrative that students accessed preferred high schools via academic merit alone.

The type of choice that more affluent, admissions activity-intensive students exercised was quite effective. Most of the students who did not qualify for FRPL either gained admission to one of their preferred schools or enrolled in private school. This result followed from affluent students' higher level of admissions-related activity after they received admissions letters. If rejected by their school of choice, they activated back up plans that involved having access to a greater amount of financial and navigational capital.

Timothy, for example, had neither grades nor test scores that were consistent with the previous year's cutoff scores at his preferred schools. He therefore decided with his parents to withdraw from the CPS application process, and enrolled at a private school from which two generations of his family graduated. Ina, whom a public school's International Baccalaureate (IB) program rejected because of her grades, enrolled in another of the school's programs. Her father then successfully advocated for her transfer into the IB program once she had begun at the school. She found these actions fair, even while recognizing that her father's insistence was a pivotal part of her admission to the new program. "They (the school) can see now what I've done and how I am, that I can do this, and they're letting me move forward." She acknowledged that her father's confidence with school personnel, free time and ability to speak English all supported her bid. Still, she believed that she had earned her spot through her own performance.

Table 4 High School Admissions Results, Sorted by Demographic Characteristics, K–8 School and Level of High School Admissions-Related Activity (N = 36)

	Percent white or mixed race with one white parent (%)	Percent eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch (%)	Percent attending Vista elementary school (%)	Mean high school admissions-related activity[a]
Admitted to selective-enrollment school (N = 7)	57	43	57	2.3
Admitted to preferred school, including selective-enrollment (N = 16)	50	44	69	2.4
Admitted to and enrolled in moderately-selective or non-selective school (N = 20)	20	80	25	1.3
Not admitted to any school on the first admissions round, ended up in non-selective schools (N = 2)	0	100	0	1

[a]Mean high school admissions-related activity was rated on a scale of 1–3, corresponding to low, middle and high activity levels described in Table 3

Access to capital drove relatively affluent students' ultimate admissions outcomes at least as much as academic merit did, yet participants insistently used merit to explain divergent admissions results. While students engaged unevenly in the second level of the meritocracy ritual—some unaware of it altogether—all embraced the two-level ritual as one in which everyone got the schooling they deserved.

Discussion and Implications

Thirty-six youth participants—all enacting high school choice policy in Chicago—helped us to answer questions about how youth who engage with school choice come to understand and act upon the distribution of educational opportunity, and the extent to which those understandings and actions varied by social identity, family resources, school resources and admissions outcomes. These youth most frequently saw opportunity distribution as ideally accomplished via academic merit, whether or not they were ultimately admitted to their preferred schools. They approved, therefore, of Chicago Public Schools' largely merit-driven choice system, only criticizing that it wasn't more merit-driven. While youth *understandings* were highly consistent, the matter of *how they acted upon* the distribution of educational opportunities varied by the extent of their social and economic privilege. All students researched schools, and most focused on performing well academically to maximize their chances at schools with competitive admissions. However, those with choice-relevant resources (Sattin-Bajaj 2014) more frequently engaged in costly activities outside of the formal high school choice policy space (such as work with private coaches and tutors) that helped them gain access to their preferred schools. In short, students with greater privilege were able to appear more meritorious than their less privileged peers.

In this article, we share our impressions of the ritual that unfolds, in which everyone is understood to be working (or not working) toward their own goals, while the nature of that work differs dramatically for youth with greater amounts of choice-relevant family resources. In this reassuring, faithfully accepted ritual, it appears that choice policy treats everyone the same way, and then rewards students according to their own individual efforts and performance. This phenomenon evokes Mary Metz's description of schools' "common script" that assures all involved that they are part of a legitimate, "real school" even though available resources and experiences differ drastically across schools (Metz 1989). In the present case, students follow a plan that tells them (and the rest of us) that school choice-driven processes for sorting students into different schools are fair. Divergent student outcomes, then—Samuél's rejection by all schools alongside Paul's triumphant acceptance to multiple elite public and private schools—would simply result from divergent choicemaking and divergent merit. Yet we see evidence in plain sight of individuals' attempts to best the system—to nudge scores upward, to pay for a better alternative, to use capital to maneuver into a program that rejected them. Through these actions, equity is simultaneously assured and undermined.

The answers to our research questions have implications in two areas. First, participants' enactment of school choice policy, and the ways in which they connect

choice and equity, reveal in greater detail how school choice policies unfold at odds with educational equity. Second, the conflict between participants' understandings and actions regarding educational opportunity provide important messages to us about the civic implications of school choice, for youth as citizens and for relationships between public schools and American society.

School Choice Policy's Inequitable Outcomes: Youth Enactment Shows Us How

This study of how youth came to understand and act upon educational opportunity adds needed details to our understanding of the relationship between school choice and equity. Through the collection over eighteen months of qualitative data about students' engagement with school choice policy, we were able to expand upon other quantitative outcome studies (e.g., Reeves and Schobert 2019) that show racial and income gaps in access to competitive admissions public schools. Our study's youth participants illustrate how enacted school choice policy can contribute to and reinforce educational inequity. This choice-equity relationship is particularly powerful when school choice policies include, as many large urban school districts do, competitive options. Among participants, inequitable access was only somewhat about individual student academic achievement, and their research of school options. Social and economic capital mattered much more to their admissions results than original school choice advocates envisioned. After all, many participants ostensibly "chose" highly exclusive public schools, but only a few found themselves admitted. We highlight how the choicemaking process can differ from one student to another, with differential results paralleling patterns of social and economic privilege. These findings evoke many other nations' extensive networks of private "shadow education," available outside of shared public education spaces, and used to bolster students' academic competitiveness and access to subsequent schooling opportunities (Bray and Kwo 2013). Like school choice policy that includes academically selective school options, shadow schools have been criticized for fueling educational and social inequity.

We hesitate to make recommendations to address the inequities engendered by how school choice policy plays out in 21st century American cities. Such a step is expected of scholarship like ours, and in fact efforts are underway to make school choice more equitable via interventions such as controlled choice and expanded school choice guidance for students who cannot afford private market services that would help them (Corcoran et al. 2018). These efforts, if they came to large-scale fruition, could increase access for some students whom current policies end up excluding.

We remind readers, however, of our findings that youth participants, like most Americans, prefer and insist upon meritocratic approaches to public education (Markovits 2019). Youth participants framed students and their parents as responsible for the quality of education ultimately received. Their defense of merit, even when their own experiences did not support a logic of merit—suggests that attempts to introduce authentic equity into school choice policies would meet with popular disapproval and resistance. Chicago Public Schools' 2010 attempt to create a more

equitable choice process, by distributing access to a large portion of academically selective schools' open seats across different socioeconomic status groups, was received poorly by this study's participants. They viewed it as antithetical to educational equity, which they ironically believed was best accomplished via merit. They have been, in the words of Suspitsyna (2010), "responsibilized" for their access to educational opportunity.

The Civic Implications of School Choice

School choice is also a civic experience. As youth participants enacted it, they learned what opportunity, equity and merit meant within their city and country. These lessons, and how participants responded to those lessons, show us what we can anticipate with regards to the relationship between schooling and urban American society if merit-oriented or merit-favorable policies continue to gain traction.

Civic Lessons for Youth From School Choice: Merit Rules

Youth participants came to learn, through their encounters with school choice, what educational opportunities they could expect, and how they could access those opportunities. They learned that, to earn a "good" education, one must perform not only well, but better than one's peers, because the learning opportunities they want are in short supply. Those with greater resources also learned the contradiction-laced lesson that everyone must work hard, but also that if they wielded a few more resources, they could "deserve" a widely preferred school even more. This smaller group of participants learned that they could make themselves appear to have more merit through private market activity like the use of human and financial capital such as high school audition coaches.

All participants learned—whether familiar with these extra, out-of-school resources or not—that their power within our educational system is gained through their own individual merit. Looking around, they also saw a disproportionately white and affluent group of their peers as those who possessed more of this sort of power. They learned to accept that those atop the figurative pile of their civic peers "deserved" to be there. Participants absorbed these heavily raced and classed lessons not in resentful defeat, not just with resigned acceptance. They often wanted these lessons reflected even more in the policies that governed their own schooling. In short, youth participants learned from choice policy the civic lesson that their educational opportunity was *their* responsibility, moreso than their educators' or their government's. The ideals of civic equity and equality were peripheral to this vision.

School Choice: At Odds with the Vision of American Schools as Society-Builders

These findings fly in the face of nineteenth-century proto-school reformer Horace Mann's (Mann 1842) vision of schools as the "balance-wheels of society," in which public education would promote social harmony and participatory democracy amidst the potentially divisive effects of economic inequality in our then-young

nation. Of course, public schools in Mann's time were not spaces where all children on U.S. soil could fully exercise educational rights, nor are they today. Intertwined with sturdy, persistent structural inequities, school choice policy—as enacted by our study's participants in contemporary Chicago—seems to oppose the civic vision of a schooling system that could help all youth equally contribute to and benefit from life in America.

Our findings offer student-centered data to the body of scholarship that raises this set of concerns. Stitzlein (2017) argued that market-based reform efforts have resulted in an exacerbation of inequality, the erosion of social justice, and a weakening of public schools' democratic capacities. She characterized democratic institutions, such as schools, as central to the perpetuation and continued development of democracy, with all citizens accountable as stakeholders, including students. Market logic, however, serves as a frame that entraps our conversation about school choice and democracy (Di Leo et al. 2015), forcing the two into relationship. While this relationship may appear hostile to many observers, it seemed to make sense to youth participants. They saw their corner of democracy—their right to fairly access public education—as something that merit-based competition could deliver to everyone. Their engagement with school choice policy showed how students, convinced that they must earn and deserve their preferred school choices, invest defensively in their own opportunities and well being. The turn here, though, is that they saw a "good" education as a private good at which they had a fair shot of gaining. Instead of understanding educational opportunity or even schooling as a shared public good, participants appeared to embrace a vision of democracy wherein the educational goods they wanted were individual choice and merit-generated, individual opportunities. We place these understandings squarely in the context of intensified 21st century urban precarity (Fine et al. 2016), whereby the effects of structural and economic shifts are multiplied by interlocking federal, state and local educational policies that necessitate a rationing of public resources and then competition to access them.

However, students' assigned responsibility in a democracy—much less in one that distributes public resources via market-based, merit-infused policies like school choice—does not absolve other stakeholders from responsibility for public education. We must question why we—as voters, educators, and parents—allow for policies that force upon youth responsibility for the quality of schooling they receive. These policies put young people in the position of hoarding educational opportunities, or of standing by while others do so, even if it reduces their own opportunity. Our findings strongly suggest that students' choice and pursuit of school options are not informed by an inclusive, participatory, collective understanding of democracy. Their schooling system in action seems to render such decisions unrealistically idealistic. School choice policy has introduced new agency—freedom from attendance boundaries that have long reinforced social inequality (Rury 1999) and the ability to deliberately choose an educational pathway. However, choice policy has also introduced competition and individual responsibility for learning opportunities gained, whether wanted or unwanted. We stand as cross-roads with regard to what we ask from our schools. Our study suggests that school choice offers the opportunity to enhance the individual, which may in the end enhance society through

some members' individual accomplishments. The realization of this vision, though, threatens schools' capacity to enhance society by promoting collective responsibility and benefit. We may not be able to have it both ways.

Conclusion

School choice policy presented the promise of expanded learning opportunities for all students beyond traditional neighborhood attendance zones, and of increased student and parent agency within the schooling process. The ways in which choice policy has unfolded in American cities—in the present study's case, Chicago— shows that these aspirations have mingled with dominant notions of merit and socioeconomic inequality to produce other results indeed. While school choice policy did create a sense of opportunity among this study's youth participants, this kind of opportunity was gained by their scramble to obtain the education they needed. Rather than a experiencing a sense of agency because of the ability to choose, students found themselves carrying out a ritual of meritocracy, blamed for failing to access oversubscribed schools they often preferred. Meanwhile, their more successful peers (most of whom used costly outside resources to boost their chances) were praised and reinforced as deserving access to those same schools. We share these findings to encourage wider, deeper reflection on whether these experiences of agency, opportunity and equity are the kinds of experiences we want our schools to provide.

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