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“The School Was Great Until It Wasn’t”: Attitudes towards School Choice of Parents of LGBTQ Children

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Abstract:

The rise in voucher programs, charter and magnet schools, and choice districts has led to more in-depth conversations around how families make educational decisions for their children. Sociologists and education scholars now study the process by which families decide a school or district that makes a good “fit” for their children, or school choice, and the social processes that determine these decisions. Currently, the literature focuses on two motivations for connecting school fit to school choice: academic achievement and race/class integration. This study proposes a third, understudied motivating factor for this process — finding a safe, supportive schooling environment for students of gender or sexual minorities. In this study, I research the experience of high-status families in and around a small New England city with LGBTQ children. I aim to explore their attitudes towards school choice in multiple stages: how they understand their children’s experience as LGBTQ in their initial schools, how parents intervene if problems arise at the initial school, and how some find new schools for their children. I use grounded theory to analyze data from semi-structured interviews with participants. Ultimately, I find that once a high-status student comes out as LGBTQ, their parents’ participation in school choice revolves entirely around their identity as a gender or sexual minority.

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“The School Was Great Until It Wasn’t”: Attitudes towards School Choice of Parents of LGBTQ Children

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2 Introduction

The rise in voucher programs, charter and magnet schools, and choice districts has led to more in-depth conversations around how families make educational decisions for their children. Sociologists and education scholars now study the process by which families decide a school or district that makes a good “fit” for their children, or school choice, and the social processes that determine these decisions. Currently, the literature focuses on two motivations for connecting school fit to school choice: academic achievement and race/class integration. This study proposes a third, understudied motivating factor for this process — finding a safe, supportive schooling environment for students of gender or sexual minorities. In this study, I research the experience of high-status families in and around a small New England city with LGBTQ children. I aim to explore their attitudes towards school choice in multiple stages: how they understand their children’s experience as LGBTQ in their initial schools, how parents intervene if problems arise at the initial school, and how some find new schools for their children. I use grounded theory to analyze data from semi-structured interviews with participants. Ultimately, I find that once a high-status student comes out as LGBTQ, their parents’ participation in school choice revolves entirely around their identity as a gender or sexual minority.

3 Literature review

Education reformers’ increased emphasis on charter schools, magnet schools and school vouchers has led to a rise in conversations around school choice (Goldring and Phillips 2008). As a result, the literature on school choice has grown considerably in recent years. A large subset of this literature emphasizes how families choose schools — by deciding on particular neighborhoods to live, whether to participate in a public school district, and, if in a choice system, which schools within the system to choose. Academic achievement is extremely influential in helping families decide which schools are most desirable (Goldhaber 1999; Hastings and Weinstein 2007). Perhaps linked to academic achievement, but certainly a factor in its own right, racial, class and educational inequality also plays a considerable role in how families understand school choice

(Holme 2002; Goyette 2008; Lareau and Goyette 2014). In this regard, the racial and socioeconomic climate of a school has been lightly studied as a factor for choosing schools (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz 1996). However, very little work has been conducted on how other inequalities in schools — particularly on the basis of gender and sexual identity — affect parents’ decision-making processes, and how they affect families’ understandings of what makes a desirable school. In short, the school choice literature doesn’t acknowledge how pursuing a safe school climate for LGBTQ students affects families’ choice of schools.

I begin with a brief assessment of the macro-level historical and political context for today’s school choice landscape, influenced greatly by the rise in charter schools and entire districts of choice. I use this context to frame a review of the literature surrounding parental school preferences and decision-making processes. Ultimately, the first part of this review details the mechanisms through which parents choose schools and the various bases on which they conceive of high-quality schools. The second part of the review examines the existing literature on issues of education for LGBTQ students. Given the class-based nature of how parents navigate choice markets based on residence, I detail issues surrounding social class and LGBTQ people, and LGBTQ students specifically. I examine challenges faced by LGBTQ students in schools that threaten their safety and academic success, and I then review the literature on proven interventions that accommodate these students’ particular academic and socio-emotional needs.

3.1 History of school choice policy

In the political sphere, the recent appointment of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of the Department of Education has helped transform the concept of “school choice” into a commonly used buzzword. In the contemporary political context, school choice often refers to students’ abilities to leave their neighborhood schools via government-run policy initiatives, such as voucher programs, charter schools and inter-district bussing. While these options are certainly prominent in the school choice literature, they do not tell a full story of the sociological implications of such choices. Rather than limiting conversations around choice to a narrow set of different school types, academics talk about school choice in a broader sense — the mechanisms through which parents choose schools for their children entirely. In this section, I provide a brief history of the macro-level political and sociological shifts that have led to the current school choice landscape, so as to understand the context in which parents make decisions about their children’s schools at the micro-level.

Conversations around school choice have been documented to exist since the founding of our country, at which point families made choices about whether to send their children to school, where to move to send their children to school, and what their schools looked like (Hentschke 2017). Still, it wasn’t until Milton Friedman’s 1955 hallmark essay, “The Role of Government in Education,” that choice became an essential component of education policy measures. Friedman introduces concerns that the federal government interferes with parents’ ultimate authority to choose schools for their children; the radical reframing of school choice as a site for tension between government intervention and parental rights was soon considered a set of mechanisms carrying sociological importance.

Freedom to choose schools played a large role in early desegregation efforts in the 1960s. In the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education*, districts enacted initiatives to allow both black and white families the option to choose their neighborhood school or another school in the district, with the hope that allowing parents jurisdiction over these decisions would help integrate all schools (Liu and Taylor 2005). The 1970s saw the rise of magnet schools, a different public school option for

families, which carried a similar mission of creating desegregated schools. Rather than appealing to parents' explicit interest in desegregated schools — a rather unsuccessful initiative in the decade prior — districts attempted to create schools that were academically appealing and offered a wide range of services attractive enough to affluent, white parents to lead them towards public schools in the inner city.

In the 1980s, emphasis on market-based solutions to the believed decline in school quality led to a surge in conversations around school choice (Cookson 1994). In line with the expansion of choice policies, the largest voucher program in the United States was rolled out in 1990 by the City of Milwaukee — one of the nation's most segregated cities (Witte 2000). Through programs like Milwaukee's Parental Choice Program, parents were able to use public funds as a voucher to attend independent, secular schools at no cost (Rouse 1998). Other large-scale voucher programs continued to expand, with inconclusive evidence of these programs' success or failure (McEwan 2000).

Many educational historians understand the landmark 2001 No Child Left Behind Act — often considered the start of a new era of education reform — as a significant expansion of school choice principles. Many point to its mission to empower parents with more information about the school their children attended via school and district report cards. Others note the federal law's guarantee to transfer students “trapped in failing schools” to better-performing schools (Holme and Richards 2009). However, choice markets under No Child Left Behind were quite limited by the inability to guarantee out-of-district transfers (Holme and Wells, 2008). The misapplication of choice principles to markets with limited options is often referred to creating an instance of “constrained choice” (Ryan and Heise 2002; Calsamiglia et al. 2010).

The school choice landscape today exists as a result of these policies, and has only expanded as a result of them. Much of this expansion has taken place in the charter school sector, whereby schools are publicly funded but are operated under a charter that allows it greater autonomy and unique accountability measures. Today, more than 2.5 million children are served by 6,000 charter schools that exist across the country (Berends 2015). Even then, voucher programs and magnet schools continue to expand in various areas of the country, and both optimistic and critical educational reformers are searching for answers as to how parents operate within expanded choice markets for their children to receive an education.

3.2 Official and unofficial choice markets

While the focus of school choice is on an explicit market of voucher programs, charter schools and magnet schools, many scholars have taken to uncovering what occurs within the “unofficial” choice market. Holme (2002) coins this term to describe a market in which high-income, high-status parents are able to move to affluent neighborhoods to guarantee the school of their choice for their children. Here, even neighborhood schools act as choice schools in a market that is not guided by government policy or the existence of alternative schools, but by the assumption that financial resources and investment unlocks a choice market without bound. Through connecting public school quality to private housing markets, affluent white parents can ensure their participation in choice markets on the basis of whatever they choose. The extent to which high-status parents choose schools based on race has been shown to increase, while choice on the basis of test scores is currently declining (Doughtery et al. 2009). Such a phenomenon occurs no matter what choice policies are made available within the district (Roda and Wells 2013). In all, the school choice literature accounts for school choice as a growing reality for all families; while access to choice and the ability to navigate choice markets in desirable ways varies due to racial,

class and geographical inequalities, families of all backgrounds are becoming more and more folded into the choice landscape.

3.3 Parent preferences and decision-making

In addition to scholarship on the history and macro-level policy concerns around school choice, much research has been conducted into how parents make decisions about schools for their children. The factors that guide parent preferences include a family's demographics, their satisfaction with their current schools, the extent to which they are involved in schools, their priorities in school characteristics, and the social networks they receive information from (Goldring and Phillips 2008). In this section, I detail the existing literature for each of these factors, so as to understand on the sociological bases upon which individual families make choices within the larger school choice landscape.

3.3.1 Family demographics

Research has shown that family demographics play a large role in how parents engage in school choice decisions. First, high levels of education are especially correlated with having high standards for educational attainment, and thus, highly-educated parents are more likely to carry the knowledge and skills to make “informed” choices about schools. A particularly often-studied line of research has shown that educated parents are more likely to send their children to private school (Coleman, Hoffer and Kilgore 1982; Long and Toma, 1988; Lankford and Wyckoff 1992).

Second, family income also guides how parents make decisions about schools. High income families are more likely to send their children to private schools (Schneider et al. 1996; Coleman and Hoffer 1987). It is worth noting that some scholars draw connections between high income families and highly educated parents, arguing that these factors are correlated such that they are unable to be assessed independently and are perhaps confounding.

Third, student race has shown to be an important factor in how families make choices about schools. Early literature on private school choice shows that students of color are widely underrepresented in private schools (Coleman et al. 1987; Long and Roma 1988). It is consistently reported that white families avoid schools with high black and Latino populations, while black families do not seek out racially segregated schools in the same way (Saporito and Lareau 1999). Black families do, however, select schools with lower poverty rates. Mickelson, Bottia and Southworth (2008) refer to these racialized preferences as a cause of increased segregation by not just race, but also class and ability status in most choice options.

As a result of family demographics' effects on parental preferences, scholars have sought to understand whether choice systems have the power to exacerbate social inequalities. Unregulated choice markets — which do not feature any outside body overseeing the market to account for equity — further stratify students along racial and class lines (Cobb and Glass, 2009). Critics of school choice markets often lament *laissez faire* school choice policies for allowing continuous, unregulated movement of children into different schools. From an equity perspective, these markets are often credited with aiding the decline of traditional, public, and segregated schools (Saporito 2003). In order to make schools more equitable and avoid segregationist practices, critics of choice systems argue that markets must regulate the assignment of children to schools.

3.3.2 School characteristics

Perhaps the most obvious basis for parental choice is the school's academic record (Goldring and Bauch 1995). The school choice literature suggests that academic achievement — often in the form of standardized test scores — exists across class lines, but increases with family income and the student's own achievement record (Hastings, Kane and Staiger 2005). This study also finds that after accounting for preferences in the racial composition of a school, both white and black families place a similarly high value on test scores in their decision-making. Others find that minority populations place a higher premium on the measurable academic quality of their schools, namely test scores and disciplinary culture, rather than high-status whites' interest in less rigid measures of school quality (Kleitz et al., 2000). No matter how it is measured, though, studies find that parents greatly value the academic performance of the school when deciding whether to attend.

There is conflicting evidence for whether using choice markets has positive effects on student achievement if parents have information on schools' achievement record. Hastings and Weinstein (2008) conducted experiments in which low-income parents were given access to school test scores in simplified, more easily legible terms. Not only were parents more likely to choose schools that are high-achieving, but also exercising choice on the basis of academic achievement showed strong effects on the achievement of their children. However, other studies show little evidence that students attending high-achieving schools in a choice context actually receive higher measurable educational outcomes, including higher test scores or increased graduation rates (Goldhaber 1999; Cullen, Jacob and Levitt 2006).

Apart from academics, parents also value other characteristics about the school culture that influence academic achievement and learning outcomes. These characteristics include convenience and proximity, school safety, and disciplinary culture. Parents often use these characteristics as proxies for whether a school is feasible to attend and promotes high achievement for students. For example, parents have been shown to consider both class size and school size in their decision-making process (Kleitz et al., 2000). Both of these school characteristics have been shown to affect both student achievement and school culture (Ehrenberg et al. 2001). Each of the following characteristics has its own merits for families, but parents may also connect them to the likelihood of improving learning outcomes for their children.

Parents find value in the proximity of a school, as a matter of convenience (Hastings, Kane and Staiger 2005). However, there exists a negative correlation between student test scores and parents' preference for proximity. This may be related to the finding that white parents and high-income parents are less likely to prioritize the location of a school than parents of color or low-income parents, which suggests that high-status white families face fewer obstacles sending their children to distant schools (Kleitz et al. 2000). Given that many school choice programs leave transportation to and from schools to parents without much support, low-income families with fewer resources, less access to transportation infrastructure or an inability to accompany young children to school cause them to understand alternative schools as less feasible for their families (Goldring and Phillips 2008).

Research has been conducted into how school safety and disciplinary culture affect parental preferences. Over 90% of both black and white families find safety and order at school to be of paramount importance in choosing a school (Viteritti 2012). Schneider et al. (1998) finds the school safety operates as a final, binary factor in whether a school is worth choosing — no matter whether a school is considered high-quality by the aforementioned measures, parents will

override their preferences if they deem a school to be unsafe. While parents theoretically have access to disciplinary data of public schools, parents often receive this information informally through school reputation (Ball and Vincent 1998).

3.3.3 Social networks

Many parents make school decisions based on what Ball and Vincent (1998) call “hot” knowledge (a school’s informal reputation, relayed by community members) rather than “cold” knowledge (formal information released by the school). Parents use their many informal networks to receive this “hot” knowledge about school quality, including student happiness, school order and disciplinary problems. These social networks are often structured around class-based measures, including parents’ residence, educational attainment and occupation (Ball and Vincent 1998; Holme 2002). Together, these measures make up a parent’s “status,” which dictates not only from whom they get information about schools, but what attributes they value in schools.

In a survey conducted by Bosetti (2004), 79% of public school parents relied on social networks as their primary source of information on schools. The same study shows that alternative school parents report being less likely to rely on social networks for information than on achievement data, including standardized test scores. However, Holme (2002) presents interview data that complicates the separation between public school parents and private school parents, on the basis of the unofficial choice market. High-status parents often change residences to attend public schools that they deem high quality rather than turn to alternative schools. Their assessment of school quality is often solely based on where they perceive other high-status parents to send their children. Middle class parents, then, are much more likely to have access to non-failing, selective schools than working-class parents, as a result of their stratified social networks (Bell 2009).

While these findings seem inconsistent, they are, in fact, compatible. This phenomenon operates on the basis of “status ideologies” — or sets of cultural assumptions that dominant groups use to justify decision-making without acknowledging the role of bias or discrimination in those decisions (Holme 2002; Oakes et al. 1997). For example, parents may use the potential for “drug problems” in schools as a stand-in for high Black and Latino student populations (Ball and Vincent 1998). Thus, high-status parents with great access to school choice make decisions in accordance with their privileged social networks, while often downplaying the prejudice in their school preferences and the inequalities that are furthered in their navigation of the unofficial school choice market.

The likelihood of parents’ uninformed decision-making is prevalent among all social classes. Even parents of lower classes do not make their decisions on the basis of consistent or accurate school information with which to make informed choices (Ascher, Fruchter, and Berne 1996; Goldring and Phillips 2008). As a result, many parents of all social classes must turn to people they know to provide them information about schools.

3.3.4 Satisfaction with current schools

In addition than choosing towards a particular type of school at the start of their children’s education, some parents may choose to change schools because they are dissatisfied with their current school. This phenomenon is often referred to as choosing “away” from schools in search of better alternatives (Martinez, Thomas and Kemerer 1994). Parents who participate in school choice report higher levels of satisfaction with their schools than parents who send their children to their neighborhood school (NCES 2012).

3.3.5 Parental involvement

School choice has been shown to impact parental involvement in schools, which may lead parents seeking involvement in schools towards school choice. Goldring and Phillips (2008) show that parents who choose away from public schools are more involved in their private schools. This finding suggests that financial investment in schools offers a greater incentive to become involved, and parents who value involvement as a desirable quality in schools may turn to private schools as a likely site for other engaged parents. Studies show that parents who participate in school choice are also more involved in their children's education (Smrekar and Goldring 1999).

3.4 LGBTQ students and school choice

As a whole, the school choice literature details the macro-level historical and political context in which parents make micro-level decisions to find the right schools for their children. The current educational landscape features expanding choice markets of alternative school programs, including voucher programs, charter and magnet schools, and inter-district sending/receiving relationships. Parents with enough resources may also participate in the unofficial choice market, moving their residence into desirable districts or financing private education for their children. It has been established that there exists a number of bases upon which parents of diverse backgrounds make decisions about schools, including academics, school characteristics, and social networks. All of these decisions are guided by social factors, including race, class and parent education level.

How are these families forced to reconsider their choices when they learn their children are LGBTQ? Research shows that many schools are unsafe for children who identify as queer or transgender. There is well-documented evidence of schools all over the country not ensuring the safety of or the proper accommodations for LGBTQ students. Moreover, a significant negative correlation exists between gender and sexual minorities and educational achievement. We know these parents, then, are challenged with the needs of their children radically changing — sometimes overnight. What remains unaddressed in the school choice literature is: how do parents find safe and accommodating schools for their LGBTQ children?

3.5 Challenges faced by LGBTQ students

As an extension of the residential areas that support the development of queer identity, LGBTQ students have particular needs and face particular challenges within schools. Issues of safety and belongingness within the school climate are among the most extensively studied challenge among education scholars. The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)'s 2013 School Climate Survey reports that 55.5% of LGBTQ students do not feel safe at their schools as a result of their sexual identity, and 37.8% because of their gender identity. Three quarters of LGBTQ students have faced verbal harassment within that calendar year, and over half reported the existence of LGBTQ-related discriminatory policies at their schools. Studies and reports also document higher levels of depression among LGBTQ students (Nieto 1992). These students are at greater risk of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts as a result of harassment and peer victimization than their straight classmates, as well. These gaps exist most significantly in middle school, but also occur in high school (Robinson and Espelage 2011). Schools have the power to raise or lower the risk of suicidal thoughts to attempts by controlling their school climate; schools with more protective and inclusive climates have demonstrated the capacity to lower the rate of suicidal thoughts among LGBT students (Hatzenbuehler et al. 2014).

Safe and affirming environments have been shown to affect educational outcomes. First, LGBTQ students show lower academic achievement than their counterparts (Birkett, Russell and Corliss 2014). Some studies attribute lower grades to higher truancy rates — LGBTQ students are far more likely to miss school than their straight peers in order to avoid harassment (Robinson and Espelage 2011; Birkett et al. 2014). LGBTQ students are also less likely to pursue higher education (Nieto 1992; GLSEN 2013; Aragon et al. 2014).

Different characteristics of schools show patterns of addressing these challenges differently. LGBT students are less likely to encounter verbal harassment in private, non-religious schools than they are in public schools or religious schools. LGBT students in public schools are more often victims of harassment based on their gender and sexual identities and are also less likely to have access to LGBT resources than their counterparts in private schools (religious or otherwise). These trends are exacerbated in the South and Midwest, especially in rural areas where choice systems are less prevalent (GLSEN 2013).

3.6 Interventions and accommodations

In light of the challenges and specific needs of LGBTQ students — particularly those who are of a lower class — scholars have assessed the efficacy of numerous interventions and accommodations for LGBTQ students.

Perhaps the most common and easily implemented intervention is the creation of gay-straight alliances. These often student-run, faculty-advised school clubs provide space for LGBTQ students to build community and for straight student allies to be educated on LGBTQ issues. Gay-straight alliances have been tied to improvements in academic achievement — both in contributing to higher grades and deciding to go to university (Lee 2002). They also engender a greater sense of safety among at-risk students, in part because of faculty and administrations' support of these clubs, and in part because of the “power in numbers” mentality that such communities provide students. Gay-straight alliances also provide faculty mentors who often have a connection with sexual minority issues and LGBTQ people (Valenti and Campbell 2009). These clubs often serve as sites of grassroots activism, which can spur larger school reforms beyond the club's existence (Mayberry 2004). This finding is supported by research that shows that even the mere presence of a gay-straight alliance at an LGBT student's school leads to positive educational outcomes, regardless of whether a student is a member of the alliance or not (Walls, Kane and Wisneski 2009).

In recent years, some schools have taken a more widespread approach to faculty and administrative support in the form of formal trainings. One 1998 study shows that the majority of school counselors felt only somewhat equipped to support LGBTQ students, and that only 2% of participants had received inservice training (Fontaine 1998, as cited in Mayberry (2004)). Since then, scholars have proposed models for how school psychologists and counselors can engage school staff in supporting LGBTQ students. Much of rhetoric around school trainings revolves around making teachers “active agents of change” who provide leadership and support to LGBTQ students in the face of harassment (Whitman, Horn and Boyd 2007). Some models propose extending trainings as far as bus drivers, coaches and after-school staff (Weiler 2003). As a result of perceived staff support, queer and trans students report lower rates of harassment and suicide attempts (Godoenow, Szalacha and Westheimer 2006).

Studies also show the importance of LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum to a positive and safe school climate for queer and trans students. Research details the extent to which classroom content

reflects heteronormative attitudes and the negative impact they have on students who aren't represented in classroom instruction (Burt, Gelnaw and Lesser 2010). These strides to diversify curriculum have a larger, more noticeable impact on safety than to just students of gender and sexual minorities — all students perceive their schools as safer when LGBTQ issues are addressed in the classroom (Toomey, McGuire and Russell 2012).

An assortment of other interventions have been researched, as well. Studies of the adoption of comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies, for example, have found mixed results about their value. One study shows that they are inversely related to frequent truancy, but they do not lead to lower levels of victimization from peers (Greytak, Kosciw and Boesen 2013). Other researchers argue that discriminatory policies contribute to LGBTQ students' feelings of isolation and victimization, and add that explicit anti-harassment policies at the school level help students feel supported and safe (GLSEN, 2013; Russell and McGuire, 2008).

At present, the sociology of education literature makes clear that various interventions for LGBTQ children exist to make the school climate safe and supportive. These accommodations show direct evidence of ameliorating the negative socio-emotional effects and educational outcomes associated with being an LGBTQ student. Ultimately, the theoretical and empirical research on school climate and academic achievement for LGBTQ students seems rather comprehensive, but the results of recent scholarship proves useful only for students at schools that are proactive in adopting these interventions. What is missing from these analyses are the mechanisms through which parents of LGBTQ students can ensure their enrollment in schools they find safe and accommodating for their children.

4 Methodology

4.1 Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants. Each of the participants identified as white, and all but one reported a household income of over \$100,000. (The final participant reported a household income between \$50,000-\$74,999.) For the purposes of this study, I understand the financial situations of all participants as middle class. The participants all reside in the metro area of a small New England city. One resides within the city limits, in a majority-white neighborhood, and four live in majority-white suburbs of the city. Many of the participants were affiliated with a major research university and work in academic administration in the city. All participants are married women.

Each participant has a child who identifies as LGBTQ, and identified as such during their K-12 schooling. Some participants have students who are currently enrolled in K-12 school, while others' children have recently graduated from high school and now attend university. The interviews asked participants to reflect on their attitudes towards what makes a good school for their LGBTQ child and to what extent they have attempted or would like to attempt to choose an ideal school for their child.

Table 1. Participants.

Julie, and her gender-non-comforming child, Alex (age 7)
Jessica, and her gay son, Drake (age 14)

Kathryn, and her transgender son, Jack (age 9)
Diana, and her transgender son, Rob (age 11)
Nancy, and her gay daughter, Alexis (age 18)

Initially, this study aimed to seek out parents of diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds so as to study the effect of race and class on parents' attitudes toward school choice. Initial recruitment efforts were made through various New Haven community institutions, including at the local LGBTQ resource center, the city's chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and the state chapter of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education network. I also attempted outreach in online communities and through networking at Yale University. Ultimately, the only venue that returned willing participants was a local university's LGBTQ resource center. Thus, almost all of the participants are in some way affiliated with the local university. This does not necessarily imply a lack of diversity of perspectives, given that each participant's relationship to the university is different. Some of those interviewed are spouses of high-profile academics, while others hold lower-level administrative assistant jobs.

Upon reflection, I attribute my inability to recruit a diverse sample from my lack of strong connections to diverse communities in the area. There are ever-present hierarchies in the LGBTQ community on the basis of race and class which often render low-income queer people of color less visible in many facets of life. In spite of my best efforts to counteract these intersectional invisibilities in my recruitment efforts,, I acknowledge my own positionally in the project, being unable to form deep-rooted connections in communities of color given the short timeline of this project. In order to expand this project to more diverse communities, researchers would likely need stronger footholds within them prior to the project.

The benefit of the project's reframing is that its smaller scope allows for in-depth focus on a particular community with particular resources. At present, there is just one explicitly LGBT public school in the United States — Harvey Milk High School in New York City — within the official school choice market. Parents looking to ensure the safety of their LGBTQ children at school may turn, then, to unofficial choice markets. High-income parents have the most mobility and resources to find these schools. In order to expand just and equitable systems of choice, we must know how those with the fewest constraints operate within them.

4.2 Theoretical framework

This project uses grounded theory — a systematic, inductive methodology that centers the construction of theory around the analysis of collected data. Grounded theory is a “comparative, iterative, and interactive” methodology, in that the collection, analysis and theorizing of data occur as simultaneous processes (Charmaz 2007). Since its creation in the 1960s, grounded theory has been established as an influential methodology in the social sciences. It exists as an alternative to more positivist frameworks for qualitative research, whereby data is fit to theoretical constructions through a rigid experimental process. Once data was collected, analytic codes and categories were developed and used for analysis. This coding process evolved into theoretical memo-writing, a tool that helps develop hypotheses for the lived experiences captured in the collected data. The phenomena that emerged from the data were sorted via a process of

theoretical sampling, through which relationships among codes turned into theoretical sampling until theoretical categories were saturated.

4.3 Research questions

The general research questions I set out to answer include:

1. How do parents understand their children's experience as LGBTQ in their initial schools?
2. How do parents intervene in schools if problems arise at the initial school?
3. How do parents decide to find new schools for their children? How does their participation in school choice processes change when looking for schools for their specifically LGBTQ children?

4.4 Two samples: parallel or separate?

Given that the study's participants were split between three parents with transgender children in elementary schools and two parents with gay children in high schools, it is important to acknowledge the extent to which these two sets of experiences can be analyzed as equivalents.

The foremost limitation in drawing parallels between the data stems from the difference between sexual identity and gender identity. First, gender identity (whether accurate or inaccurate) is assigned even before birth, and studies have shown that discordance between one's assigned gender and their self-identified gender can arise even in early childhood [reference needed]. Meanwhile, children are unlikely to develop sexual identities until adolescence — or perhaps even later. The literature details differences in how students understand safety in relation to their LGBTQ identities — The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)'s 2013 School Climate Survey reports that 55.5% of LGBT students do not feel safe at their schools as a result of their sexual identity, and 37.8% because of their gender identity. In the following results, I note different issues that are experienced by students who identify as sexual minorities (particularly, finding accepting social circles) and students who identify as gender minorities (namely, finding institutional recognition and accommodations of their identity).

Such limitations are also present given the age of the two samples. All participants' transgender students are of elementary school age, whereas all participants' gay students were in high school (or just graduated from high school) at the time of participation. The reasons for this split are likely in relation to the aforementioned differences in gender and sexual identity. More importantly, however, the effects of this split are such that parents may hold different attitudes towards school choice when their children are just beginning their K-12 schooling rather than when their children are nearing the end of their secondary schooling.

In spite of the significant ways that this study cannot treat these experiences as equivalent, there remains great similarity between the experiences of parents of both gay and transgender students. This is a result of this study's focus on parental assessment of their children's schooling needs. Given that a child is not assumed to be neither gay nor transgender at birth, it is possible that parents' assessment of their children's needs change after they have already participated in school choice markets. Consider how this differs from other minority classes, such as race or class, whereby a parent is able to address their children's particular schooling needs on the basis of an identity category at a much earlier age.

In sum, it is necessary to acknowledge that the participant sample is, in some ways, split into two participant samples. In this section, they are often compared against each other to better draw out the rich distinctions between parents of queer students and trans students. While their

experiences diverge in critical ways, there remain telling points where their narratives come together. In both cases, the data detail important dimensions of how parents of LGBTQ students make decisions about schools.

5 Results + discussion

Initial school choice

All parents that participated began their children's schooling in public schools. As the choice literature shows, this does not preclude these parents from making decisions about neighborhoods and schools. Significant, but not surprising, no participant made their initial choice decisions having considered that their children might eventually identify as LGBTQ, nor did they choose schools explicitly on the basis of safety or any other particular accommodation. Rather, all parents initially enrolled their children in schools by more traditional means. In line with the school choice literature, this study finds that parents chose schools a) they learned of through social networks, b) they perceive to match their values, and c) within the circumstances of job and family obligations.

When Diana first looked to find a school for her child — shortly after moving from a major midwestern city to a rural area in New England for her partner's work — she noted that her family was “not in a place financially to pay for private preschool.” Instead, she asked her daycare provider in their previous city for recommendations for preschools. For elementary school, Diana sends her children to a charter school for which she resides in the catchment area. While she did not choose her residence to attend any particular school, she finds out about alternative schools through her social networks:

You know, friend networks, I think. Because at that point, your friend groups — everyone is going through the same thing. Some people are way more on top of it than others, and that info just spreads. And it was small enough... [the area] is small enough that pretty much most people know a lot of people.

From her social networks, Diana was attracted to the diversity that the charter school offered, and she reports valuing the social benefits of learning in a heterogenous environment. She also noted the rigor of the classroom instruction and curriculum, learning from an internet resource that the school featured an intense bilingual program. Ultimately, Diana made her decision about schools within the circumstances of her partner's career, and based on her social network's perception of the school matching her values of academic achievement and social diversity.

Julie also based her decisions about schools on traditional measures, including social networks and academic achievement:

We know people, he know people who were going there, friends from day care, friends from our synagogue, and we'd heard really positive things. And I think it's also — you know, I don't believe much in the test scores as a measure — but I think it does okay.

Other parents were initially limited in their access to choice given family obligations. Nancy, for example, reports moving to a suburb in order to live near to her step-son. Though she paid for her daughter, Alexis, to attend private preschool close to her office — a decision she made in order to receive after-school care while she was at work — she sent Alexis to public school shortly after because she found private school too costly for her family.

The city in which this study takes place features an all-choice school district. Some parents enrolled their children in these public schools, but found the choice process frustrating and difficult. They report feeling as though their choices were often constrained by the district's bureaucratic inefficiencies and frequent miscommunication. The lottery system left feeling a "lack of agency," or misunderstanding.

All of these findings are in accordance with existing research on parental school choice. Parents are often constrained by work and family obligations. Many are able to make decisions within their circumstantial limitations, and those who are able to exercise more choice do so largely based on the recommendations of social networks. Minor care is put into other school characteristics, including academic achievement and social diversity. Most importantly, no participants made decisions on any aspect of their child's personality or to seek out special accommodations for any particular trait specific to their child.

Watchful vigilance and reactivity

The participants were able to make fairly traditional decisions because they were not aware of their children having any particular needs that threatened their academic or social experience at school. When their children came out as LGBTQ later in their schooling, each parent devoted extra attention to their school environments. Though parents understood the possibility of their chosen school as unsafe given their child's gender or sexual identity, parents were not proactive in finding safe or accommodating alternatives. Rather, they were reactive — that is, they did not act on finding other choices until problems arose for their children as a result of their LGBTQ identity at school.

Consider Nancy's experience moving her daughter out of private kindergarten into public school, as mentioned earlier:

Anything other than the public schools would have been prohibitively expensive for us. So, my basic assumption was that we'll send [Alexis] to public school unless something is broken. And nothing was broken, so it was okay.

Though Alexis did not come out until well into her time in public school, Nancy's attitude towards whether to keep her enrolled in her neighborhood school remained unchanged even after her experiences there as a queer woman. The attitude of staying in the school until problems occur was shared by all parents. Diana feels similarly of her school situation: "The school was great until it wasn't."

Julie is aware of her reactive attitude towards problems at her gender-non-conforming child, Alex's initial school, and expresses some remorse for not being proactive in finding a new school for Alex:

If I'm only being reactive, you know, I don't want it to get to bullying or anything like that and then feel really stupid that I didn't go in before with guns blazing, saying, "Let's fix this before it becomes an issue," but for right now it seems like that's okay. We'll just keep, keep paying attention.

It is important to recognize that while parents did not immediately switch their children into new schools at the time of their coming out, they all kept a careful watch on whether their schools remained proper fits for their children.

Nancy was confident that the faculty and staff at Alexis's high school would be invested in her success as a queer student. Her concerns lay greater in whether students would be accepting of Alexis, and whether Alexis would find a supportive social circle that would allow for her to feel safe at school. She says of her experience:

We were always thinking about – hypothetically, what if things go south? ...I was pretty sure that the school administration and the teachers would be accommodating. ... Yes, I wondered, would the other kids harass her, and if so, what would we do? Luckily that never came to pass. We were lucky. She was lucky.

Nancy admits to not looking seriously into the details of her daughter's social and emotional success at school. Rather, she felt assured that her daughter was well-adjusted at her high school for two reasons. First, one of Nancy's family members worked at the school. She found it assuring to have a close relative at the school who could both make Alexis feel more secure and supported in her environment and alert Nancy should any problems at the school arise. Second, Alexis connected with a group of girls at school who formed a rock band. The benefit of this for Alexis was two-fold: it served as a space for Alexis to explore being "weird," and it allowed for Alexis to find community of other students with alternative interests at her school. Likely as a result of her daughter's age, Nancy granted her daughter independence to find her social circles – and once she did, Nancy's original concerns that Alexis would not fit in at school were easily quelled.

Interestingly, neither of the parents of sexual minorities reported any problems at their schools, and as a result, made the choice to continue to enroll their children in their current schools. Both Jessica's son, Drake, and Nancy's daughter, Alexis, came out as gay in high school, while the rest of the participants' transgender children came out in elementary school. It is possible that this difference creates large discrepancies between the window of time possible for issues to arise at the school and the nature of parents' attentiveness to their children's academic and social development. Given the extremely small sample size of this population, I draw no generalizable conclusions about this trend. Instead, I reiterate my earlier emphasis on the differences between gender and sexual minorities and the age at which they develop these identities. I call for more extensive research in this area in order to present conclusive evidence of this trend.

Problems at initial schools

The three parents of transgender children each reported problems their children faced at their initial schools. Many of these problems arose out of feeling that school staff was unequipped or unwilling to accommodate their child's gender identity.

Parents were rather forgiving of children who made fun of their children or misunderstood their gender identity. They saw those issues as either inevitable or a failing of the school staff to intervene in these conflicts.

Over a period of a few months, Kathryn's son, Jack, came to her repeatedly about a student on the school bus that would often question him about his gender. Kathryn saw the school at fault for the repeated incidents, which she understood as harassment, and asked for the student to be separated from Jack on the bus. When the school asserted that the child simply did not understand gender, Kathryn expressed great frustration by their unwillingness to train staff or use trans-inclusive curriculum. She saw their ambivalent response as an inability to take action to protect her son from harm.

Kathryn's discontent with the school staff's handling of peer conflict can be contrasted with Julie's positive experience with staff intervention in this regard. When asked whether her gender-non-conforming child, Alex, suffered from harassment or bullying from other students, she appeared unfazed by any peer conflict:

Kids have been mean, but kids are mean. I can't really expect the kids not to be mean. And the adults have all, you know, looked out for him, but also just treated him just straightforwardly and, and in a chill manner, you know, complimenting him on his different clothes, but, or his long hair, but not making a big deal out of it.

All three parents detailed incidents of their children's conflicts with their peers. No parent, however, found conflicts with peers to be a deterrent to keeping their children at their initial school. More telling of parents' (dis)content, though, was the school staff's intervention and support for their children's gender identity.

Parents saw the need for staff support beyond resolving conflicts among peers, and held strong beliefs about the staff's power to create or destroy supportive academic and social environments for their children. This power was often enacted in harmful ways in the classroom, which led parents to believe that their children's learning was impeded by teachers' insensitive behavior.

Diana recalls her son, Rob, spending the majority of the school day in a bilingual classroom, where the teachers — perhaps reinforced by the language they spoke — expressed many gender normative ideas and behaviors. “[The teacher] gave him lots of attention when he came in looking girly [in line with the gender listed on his official school records] — she was trying to reinforce the gender stereotype over and over.”

Interventions at original school

In response to the issues faced at schools, all three parents decided to intervene by meeting with school staff. They all did so, again, as a reactive measure to existing problems brought to their attention, but not as a proactive measure before issues arose. At first, two of three parents faced backlash from teachers and administrators, and the onus was placed on parents to continue to push for their children's needs until they were granted by the school or district.

Diana and her partner first scheduled conferences with teachers to help their son, Rob, feel safe in gendered restrooms. After a particular incident where Rob was bullied by other students in the women's restroom — which the school pushed him to use in spite of his gender identity — Diana wanted to talk to teachers to find a solution to the issue of restrooms. When the teachers proposed a solution that Diana did not find helpful, but rather further isolating (which included using a separate gender-neutral restroom on a separate floor of the building), she continued to push for Rob's right to use the men's bathroom until the staff conceded.

Kathryn intervened in her son, Jack's school on the topic of training. Since Jack is diagnosed with a learning disability as well as being transgender, Kathryn and her husband meet together regularly with various academic support staff in order to make sure Jack is receiving the proper special education accommodations. Kathryn reports also getting information about Jack's social and emotional development through these meetings, which she felt positively about. However, once Kathryn aimed to make greater systemic change via formal district channels, she faced troubling ambivalence towards helping trans students:

I think some of the staff were really good. I think most of the teachers were great. Most everybody - the social worker was really great, very understanding, very helpful, very

responsive. I think when we got to the higher level of administration, it kind of fell apart. That's where I was less satisfied.

Kathryn met regularly with the superintendent and fought hard to voice her strong interest in the school hosting a training for working with LGBTQ students in the classroom. She reports that connecting the school with resources it would not have sought out on its own was a time-consuming process:

I have friends who do school trainings, and I've made connections, so I've had people who said they would do the training for free. I would reach out to them, and they would reach out to the school, and I would reach out to the school, via email or call or whatever. Yeah, it was [a lot of] time [spent].

At some point for two parents – Kathryn and Diana – the problems that arose at their first school became too large for intervention to solve. In both cases, incidents that revealed a recurring lack of institutional support caused the parents to make the final decision to choose another school. Consider Kathryn's dissatisfaction with remnants of poor record-keeping at Jack's elementary school:

Some things I would hear from him, like, 'My name isn't changed in the [school-owned] computer [database].' The thing that really sealed the deal... was that they misprinted his name in the yearbook. They printed his birth name. I was like, 'Okay, nope.'

Diana attributes her choosing away from Rob's initial school to a similar frustration — what she understood as the school's repeated ambivalence towards creating an inclusive environment for her child:

The mechanisms that [they] are using are having the effect of making [Rob] feel singled out, rejected, left out, you know, like that. So wherever it's coming from, it's having that effect on this child. And as a kid, who is a trans-boy, he's going to make sense of it that way too. So, what [were they] going to do about it? Their choice, over and over and over, was to either do nothing about it, or to punish him for the behaviors that ensued.

Meanwhile, Julie faced no problem large enough to deter her from attending her first-choice school.

This evidence shows that parents are willing to remain in schools past the point of having issues with how the staff accommodates LGBTQ children. Parents take extreme efforts to intervene in scenarios where they sense their children are unsafe or not supported properly, and often put much time and effort into their attempts to ensure that schools provide quality education for their trans students. It was only once parents got the sense that the school was unwilling to support their children that they decided to choose away from the school they initially attended. Thus, I argue that the impetus for a parent of a queer or trans child to choose to switch schools is the incompatibility of their perception of their student's needs as a gender or sexual minority, and that of the administration and staff.

Choosing a new school

Once parents committed to choosing away from their initial school, they navigated the choice process in markedly different ways.

Parents still received recommendations for schools from their social networks, but the information they solicited was no longer linked as explicitly to reputations around status or

academic achievement. Instead, parents focused exclusively on schools' ability and willingness to accommodate their children's LGBTQ identity. Kathryn looked at schools that were recommended to her by her son's psychologist, who knew members of the board of the private school she later decided to enroll her son in. Kathryn also put greater effort into the decision-making process — touring schools, having Jack shadow students at the school, and meeting with staff members to get a sense whether “he would be accepted and feel more like a member of the classroom, and not be so withdrawn.”

Diana's values in her decision-making also shifted towards private schools. She initially reports feeling influenced by what other people in where new occupation sent their children. However, she admits that her preferences reflect more greatly her need to ensure that the school in which she enrolls Rob will be more accommodating of his LGBTQ identity:

Our experience to that point with a public charter school... screw it. We need to put him somewhere where if they're not doing what we want [with regard to Rob's trans identity], we can be like, 'We're paying you to do this for our child.' Doesn't that give us leverage?

Choosing a safe and supportive school presented unique challenges for parents, particularly in the location and cost of the schools they had access to. In spite of the geographic or financial limitations that they faced, parents shifted away from perceived convenience or affordability, and towards making larger sacrifices for their children's schooling than they were comfortable making when they chose an initial school.

When Diana's partner got a new job in a different state, she and her partner decided to purchase a house in the new location, in part as an opportunity to gain access to a new school market. The family decided to move Diana's partner and Rob into the new house six months earlier than the rest of the family so that Rob was able to access new school options. This may have disrupted the family dynamic, but ultimately, Diana found the move worthwhile to expedite Rob's entrance into a more accommodating school.

Meanwhile, Kathryn noted that the financial cost of Jack's new school was difficult to pay for. “We're just ordinary folks who live in a little cave on a tiny little lot,” she says, and the demographic data I collected shows that the tuition at Jack's new school is as much as 25% of her family's yearly income. Her family receives financial assistance from the school, but they acknowledge that the tuition scholarships they have received are not guaranteed beyond the year they are awarded. As a result, Kathryn reports that they often think about the expense of providing Jack with a quality education where he feels safe. Still, she maintains that Jack's current school is the best fit for him.

As a whole, parents who choose away from schools they deem harmful for their LGBTQ students make decisions explicitly on the basis of their child's gender or sexual identity. They still rely on social networks for recommendations on schools, but they become far more hands-on in gathering information for their decision-making process. They are also more willing to make sacrifices in order to expand their access to choice markets in the hopes of ensuring a safe and supportive school environment for their children.

Intersections with other accommodations

The preferences for which parents choose these new schools are solely on the basis of their children's LGBTQ identity. Parents were also quick to prioritize their children's needs as gender

or sexual minorities over other accommodations in the classroom, and in one case, rendering other special accommodations as entirely unimportant in the choice process.

Consider the case of Kathryn, whose son, Jack, is both transgender and is documented with a reading disability. In choosing a school for Jack that meets his needs, Kathryn decides to prioritize his needs as a transgender student over his special education needs. At the private school that Jack currently attends, he happened to receive comprehensive reading support. However, Kathryn states that such an accommodation was not a priority for her in choosing a school:

The month he turned seven, I put him on antidepressants. I was like, this kid... just knowing the statistics [on transgender children and suicide], and knowing how he was presenting, I was like, what does it matter where he's at academically right now? Is he even available to learn right now?

Kathryn attributes her son's reading disability to be a product of the difficulty of his transition. "We don't think he's a strong reader, but we don't think he's as behind as he once was."

When Diana finds her son, Rob, at the intersection of transgenderism and attention deficit hyperactive disorder, she also prioritizes accommodations for her son's gender identity over those for her son's learning ability status.

The school didn't want to provide services, and instead of using that plan to think about positive ways to integrate him into the classroom or keep him on task, they used it to punish him, like over and over, and at some point, it became obvious to us, that they were using that as a proxy to punish him for his gender.

Diana also finds examples where Rob was mistreated or singled out for needing accommodations in accordance with his 504 plan. "This isn't necessarily connected to gender, but you can imagine how a trans kid would experience this," she says.

Anyways, the preferential seating they came up with was that all the kids would sit on the rug, and Robert will be in a chair, halfway across the room so he can't interact with anybody, and also can't hear anything, can't participate, can't.... nothing, which would just make him distraught, because he loves to learn. The one thing he said when we pulled him out of there was like, 'I really, really, like school, and they made it really, really hard to like school.'

In deciding whether to find a school that accommodated Rob's ADHD in addition to his gender identity, Diana chose not to seek out schools with strong special education. She has faith that a school that is accommodating of Rob's trans identity will be supportive of all of his needs:

My understanding and experiences that you're either in a school that accommodates and supports children, or you don't have that culture.

When faced with several priorities in choosing a new school for their children, both parents that switched schools did so primarily to accommodate their child's gender identity. Even when they were faced with the option to seek out schools that meet their children's other needs, they both prioritized LGBTQ identity over all other special needs.

Looking forward, continuous choice

Whether parents actually switched schools or not, all parents with younger children acknowledged that their search for safe and accommodating schools for their children has not ended with one school. Each parent whose child came out as LGBTQ in elementary school carries an understanding that their children's identities are still developing. With their identities being in flux, it follows that their educational needs are, as well. Diana believes that while Rob's gender identity is bound to develop and change over time, the schools that would properly aid his development would remain static. She understands a good school for her child as one that is entirely supportive of the entire family's journey, independent of the specific iteration of his gender identity:

I think we're now, at a place that is fairly stable. I think that when you're going through the process of understanding and not having information and trying to sort [it all] out, you're trying to be supportive but not understanding how to do that. You're in a period of flux and in some ways, the school structure you're in can help you weather that or not.

None of the parents interviewed sent their children to K-12 school, and thus, those with young children have already put thought into what the school choice process looks like going forward.

Kathryn is already concerned about the possibility of putting her son in public middle school. She reports being scared by the political climate that she finds in public schools, and she sees the choice to attend private school as an empowering tool to find people who get along with Jack:

If you go to the public school, that's your public school. But when he gets older, he could maybe find his little group where he fits. I just can't see putting him back in public school right now... I don't foresee him coming back to public school."

Julie has already been forced to consider the difficulties of finding a new supportive school for her son, including the possibility of having to reenter the unofficial choice market by changing residences for safe public schools:

I'm very pro-public school, which means I'm a little bit anti-private school, so I would not, that wouldn't be really, that would, it would take many many steps before I would be ready to do that... I suppose if things were really not positive, I might consider that, though I don't relish the idea of selling my house. But I think that might be something that I would be more likely to consider than going to private school for him.

In all, parents' choices for schools that are safe and accommodating for their LGBTQ children — however successful they find them at present — do not mark the end for these parents' participation in school choice processes. Parents still exercise the watchful vigilance they have built since their children have come out as LGBTQ, and they make continuous decisions to maintain their enrollment in their current schools or enroll their children in new schools that are (hopefully) also safe and accommodating. This process is certainly daunting to these parents, but all agree that it is worthwhile work to ensure their children a supportive learning environment.

6 Conclusion

This project aimed to understand the processes through which high-status parents of LGBTQ students make decisions about schools. It found that parents did not initially choose schools for their students with regard for their possible LGBTQ identity. However, once their children came out as LGBTQ, all parents employed watchful vigilance and took a reactive approach to whether their initial school was a good fit. The problems that parents found most troubling involved staff members' ambivalence or weak leadership towards accommodations parents found necessary for

their children. Parents often intervened in these instances through meetings with school staff, but if they felt that their interventions did not resolve issues, they decided to choose away from their initial schools. Parents who sought after new schools for their LGBTQ children did so with increased effort and sole focus on finding schools that were safe and supportive for LGBTQ students. Even when parents enrolled their children in schools they felt confident were safe and accommodating, they remained constantly aware of the need for future decision-making until their children completed their K-12 education.

Given that this project is the first to understand parents' school choice decisions in the context of LGBTQ students, it is necessary to develop areas for future research. First, I call for the replication of this study with more systematic, generalizable data. This study faces a severe limitation in its minimal participant sample. What does the choice process look like with a more representative sample of significant size? Second, I encourage the extension of this research to families with less mobility and access to choice as a factor of their status. This study looked at high-status, middle-class, white parents — according to the school choice literature, those with the most access to choice. How do families of different races and classes find safe and accommodating schools for their children? Third, I propose an extension of this research to families who live in smaller choice markets. The New England city that this study took place is notable for its school district of choice, inter-district programs and number of charter and alternative schools. What does the process of choosing schools look like for families with fewer options in their choice markets?

These questions are solely starting points in understanding the connection between school choice and LGBTQ schooling. We must make ambitious strides towards understanding the mechanisms that both guide and constrain parents in deciding what schools accommodate their children and allow them to be successful. Without this work, neither the literature on school choice nor LGBTQ schooling will be complete. And, perhaps more importantly, we will be unable to fully promote a just and safe future for LGBTQ students in schools.

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