

A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF LITERATURE EXAMINING CHOICE PROGRAMS AND
ISSUES OF EQUITY WITHIN PUBLIC EDUCATION

by

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A GRADUATION PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF EDUCATION

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Educational Administration & Leadership)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

April 2012

Abstract

The aim of this systematic literature review is to explore issues of equity surrounding choice programs in public education. We define choice program as an optional program offered in a public education system that emphasizes a particular language, culture, religion or subject matter, or uses a particular teaching philosophy. Twenty-seven articles met these criteria and were coded for themes, methodology, and location. Several dominant themes emerged relating to inequities of choice in public education: the importance of families' socioeconomic status, geospatial concerns, issues of access to information, and parent rationale for choosing. Segregation and stratification of student populations due to choice programs were also identified as issues of equity related to educational choice. This review also identifies gaps within the literature and makes recommendations for future research and practice. Finally, this study applies these findings to the local context of Vancouver, BC, Canada, in examining the admissions process for one choice program in the district, a high school arts program (Byng Arts Mini School).

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and conceptual framework

What role should choice play within public education? This is a question that has been at the centre of scholarly debate – a debate that has intensified over the past three decades with the growth of choice policies across North America (Archbald, 2004; Ball & Lund, 2010; Lee, 1993; Linkow, 2011). Questions about choice and schooling have been around since the beginning of what has become today's public school system. As compulsory schooling first took shape in the nineteenth century, paid for and controlled by the state, early conceptions of choice pertained to issues of attendance. As Osborne (1999) notes, debate often focused on one's choice *not* to attend school, as some people were opposed to compulsory schooling based on various grounds (cultural, religious, family values). Since then, however, "choice" has become a rather nebulous term and as public education has evolved over the years so has the concept of choice. As such, it is important to examine and understand exactly what "choice" means within the context of the current debate around the proliferation of choice policies in public education.

Today's modern concept of educational choice can be traced back to economist Milton Friedman's 1955 article, *The Role of Government in Education*, in which he extolled the virtues of liberty and free enterprise. For Friedman, choice is represented by a government-financed voucher system that allows parents the freedom of selecting an educational institution of their preference. The role of government, aside from financing redeemable vouchers for families, would be limited to setting and assuring certain minimum standards regarding content and curriculum. The benefits of such a system, according to Friedman, would be two-fold. First, by expanding the range of educational options for parents, a wide variety of schools would arise to meet consumer demands and, as a result, competitive private enterprise would lead to the

creation of more efficient, customer-satisfying schools. Friedman's second argument for school choice is steeped in notions of equity as he views choice as a means of overcoming class-based educational disparities. Indeed, he states that the socioeconomic stratification that naturally occurs when a parent's choice of school is limited to where a family resides would be reduced and overcome by widening the range of school options for parents. It is with these two arguments that Friedman helped establish the conceptual framework that underlies today's choice movement.

While Friedman's 1955 article sowed the seeds of choice, it would take nearly thirty years before the choice movement in the U.S. and Canada would begin to grow and significantly shape educational policies. In 1983, the publication of *A Nation At Risk*, a report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, ignited a "crisis of confidence in America's public education system that has not yet ceased" (Linkow, 2011, p. 414). The report, which condemned U.S. public schools as being "eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 9) that threatened the future of the nation, helped spark a flurry of educational reforms that included policies to expand parental choice. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the number of magnet schools in the U.S. increased dramatically – particularly in urban school districts (Archbald, 2004). Many of these magnet schools, considered public specialty schools designed to provide themed programs to a select group of students, often have admission requirements and/or auditions. Following the rise of magnet schools was the charter school movement of the 1990s that continues to flourish today (Linkow, 2011). Charter schools, although publicly funded, are distinguished by their focus on choice, autonomy, and accountability. Indeed, choice advocates praise these institutions' abilities to meet the wants and needs of parents and students while having the autonomy from bureaucracy to allow for

efficiency and innovation (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Choice reform in the U.S. has not been limited to these two options. The choice movement that has grown since the 1990s also includes policies such as open inter-district and intra-district enrollment as well as school vouchers – publicly funded grants that allow families to attend private schools (Linkow, 2011).

Furthermore, a shift in underlying conceptions of education has also contributed to the increase in choice options. Opposing conceptions of education represent a central tension surrounding choice reform: a universalistic view in which a universal system of education is available to all regardless of circumstance, and a particularistic view based on the recognition of difference (Loxley & Thomas, 2001). Fallon (2008) suggests that “part of this tension was expressed in policy narratives that called for dismantling of a universalistic conception of public education and the substitution of particularism (Ellison, 1999) as the new organizing principle for public education” (p. 15). According to a particularist conception of education, individual parents are the best judge of their child’s needs and best interests, and schooling should be organized accordingly (Gordon & Whitty as cited in Fallon, 2008). This tension between underlying conceptions of educational organization further adds to the growing context facilitating the emergence of choice programs. In light of these factors, it would appear that aspects of Friedman’s 1955 vision for an education system aimed at meeting consumer demands have come to pass within many U.S. school districts.

Choice in the Canadian context

In Canada, early examples of choice policy in education can be traced back to the emergence of French immersion programs in Quebec during the 1960s (Cummins, 1998). A program designed to ensure the development of individual bilingualism, French immersion can now be found across the country in all provinces and two territories. The rise of French

immersion in Canada was most dramatic through the 1980s, evidenced by a significant spike in enrollment figures over that time (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007) – a trend that appears to mirror the timing of the U.S. choice movement.

Educational choice in Canada has not been limited to French immersion programs. Indeed, public education became increasingly criticized in Canada for being bound by bureaucratic regulations and self-interest, thereby failing to respond to local and individual needs. In 2002, a report by the Select Standing Committee on Education (SSCE) for the British Columbia Ministry of Education determined that choice provided a means of recognizing individual differences between learners, and thus encouraged diverse and innovative approaches for increasing academic achievement. These dynamics of choice were further promoted in 2002 as the government of British Columbia passed legislation that opened school boundaries, paving the way for greater parental school choice (Ministry of Education, 2011). Today, open boundary policies are practiced in all provinces across Canada (Brown, 2004). In Alberta, the number of charter schools has risen considerably since 1994 with the majority of these institutions springing up in urban districts (Ball & Lund, 2010). Furthermore, there has been a steady increase in choice programs in provinces like British Columbia – again mainly focused in urban centres. For example, over the last five years alone, the Vancouver Board of Education has added new programs such as Mandarin bilingual, Intensive French, and a hockey academy to already existing French immersion, Montessori, International Baccalaureate, and mini-school programs within the district (Vancouver School Board, 2011a).

This expansion in programs and policies in both the U.S. and Canada suggests widespread public support across North America for increasing choice within public education. Indeed, surveys have been conducted in Canada that would appear to confirm this (Brown,

2004). However, the proliferation of choice has not been without contentious debate and growing criticism.

The choice debate

Since Friedman, much of what has been written in favour of choice in education can be grouped into two overarching arguments: the efficiency argument and the equity argument. Strong advocates of choice, such as Chubb and Moe (1988, 1990), argue largely from the efficiency model. Beginning with the assumption that public education is in a state of crisis and citing the “rising tide of mediocrity” as reported by *A Nation At Risk* (1983), Chubb and Moe emphasize the bureaucratic limitations of a state-run school system that fails to satisfy parents and students (Chubb & Moe, 1988). Arguing that choice offers a “panacea,” Chubb and Moe state that choice provides parents with an “exit option” thereby giving schools incentives to satisfy their clientele. In this scenario, failing schools would be weeded out leaving more efficient, better organized, and, ultimately, higher quality schools (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

The crisis discourse surrounding public education also underlies the arguments of early choice advocates Coons and Sugarman (1971, 1990). Like Chubb and Moe, Coons and Sugarman stress that public schools lack diversity and are models of inefficiency (Coons & Sugarman, 1971). However, just as with Friedman’s equity-based argument, they emphasize the important role of choice in overcoming socioeconomic disparities. Indeed, the absence of choice is “deeply injurious” to education as it reinforces class distinctions (Coons & Sugarman, 1990, p.55). Advocates of voucher systems, Coons and Sugarman believe that a choice system “must aim to reduce class and racial segregation” by providing all families the freedom to choose among both private schools and high quality public schools (p.55).

In contrast, critics of choice have a very different perspective on the relationship between choice and equity. Rather than enhancing options for poor and minority families, critics believe educational choice reinforces existing social and cultural inequities. Outspoken critic, Michael Apple (2001, 2004), associates choice policies in education as part of a general neoliberal emphasis on marketization. According to Apple (2001), because markets systematically privilege higher socioeconomic status families due to their knowledge and material resources, these are the families most likely to benefit from and exercise choice. Furthermore, with increased competition, rather than improve the overall quality of educational institutions, schools of poorer students will continue into a downward spiral as more advantaged students take advantage of their exit options (Apple, 2001).

Canadian scholars have also been critical of the role of choice in education. Like Apple, Charles Ungerleider in his 2003 book, *Failing Our Kids: How We Are Ruining Our Public Schools*, is critical of an underlying neoliberal agenda that threatens public education. According to Ungerleider, “the call for educational choice in Canada is fuelled by widely held misconceptions,” cautioning that our proximity to the U.S. makes Canada vulnerable to the rhetoric of failing schools that seeps across the border (Ungerleider, 2003, p. 178). Other Canadian academics who have examined issues of equity in relation to choice policies include Ball and Lund (2010), whose Alberta-based case study examines class stratification and marginalization as a result of dual program schools. In addition, Yoon and Gulson (2010) reveal social and cultural stratification resulting from French immersion programs in their Vancouver-based case study.

An alternative perspective on choice can be found in the work of Gaskell (1999). Rather than framing the debate around choice using a market metaphor (as many of the above scholars

do), she prefers to use a frame of diversity instead. For Gaskell, the market framework is too limited to address the complexities of the choice debate. She maintains that a lens of diversity and equity would allow for a greater understanding of the issue. Furthermore, she suggests that research on school choice should move beyond “pro” or “con” issues and focus instead on “*how* [emphasis added] decisions are made about the limits of choice within a public school system” (p. 4).

The existing debate around choice and education is particularly interesting due to the profound divergence in perspectives regarding both the meanings of, and the relationships between, “choice” and “equity.” And yet, despite critics’ concerns that educational choice reinforces existing inequities, policies in support of choice continue to proliferate in many school districts across North America. In light of these inconsistencies, this systematic review of current academic literature attempts to develop a clearer understanding of choice within public education and the impact it may have on issues of equity.

1.2 Researchers’ locations, rationale, and research statement

Locations

This systematic literature review is written from the perspective of both elementary school teachers and graduate students at the University of British Columbia. As a four-member research team, our teaching backgrounds offer both commonalities and diversities. We are all elementary school teachers within the urban centre of Vancouver’s lower mainland: two members of our team are primary French immersion teachers from a school in a lower socioeconomic Eastside neighbourhood within the Vancouver school district; one is a Grade 6/7 teacher, also within the Vancouver school district, from a school in a more affluent Westside neighbourhood; and the final team member is a Grade 6 teacher from an independent Christian

school in Burnaby. All members of our team have directly experienced choice policy from a range of perspectives -- two of our members as French immersion teachers, one member through assisting Grade 7 students with choice program applications for secondary schools, as well as having had a choice program introduced then later removed at his school, and our final member as a teacher at a choice school. Despite the differences in our teaching backgrounds and experiences with choice programs, our research team does share a common concern regarding issues of equity surrounding choice in public education.

Rationale

One of the reasons for our undertaking of this review surrounds questions of equity. Choice within education is often framed by advocates and policy-makers around notions of equity such as “freedom” and “opportunity.” However, critical literature from our preliminary review, as well as our experiences as teachers, indicate that concerns about inequities arising from choice policies do exist. We hope that a systematic review of current academic literature will provide insight into these diverging frameworks by identifying underlying themes, commonalities, and gaps -- both conceptually and by way of research. Furthermore, much of the published peer-reviewed literature we have analyzed is U.S. based. As Vancouver teachers, we will add both a Canadian and a localized perspective to the dialogue around choice and education by applying our understandings of the literature to our own school district -- the Vancouver Board of Education.

Research statement and purpose of this review

This review will analyze literature on choice programs with the aim of exploring issues of equity within the context of public education. By first reviewing academic literature, this review seeks to understand what current research findings and debates exist regarding choice programs

and equity issues. Once the literature has been reviewed, we apply our findings to a local context by examining the admissions procedures and criteria of a choice program within the Vancouver school district. Ultimately, it is the hope of our research team that this systematic literature review will not only contribute to the expanding conversations around choice and education, but also provide possible recommendations for future research and practice.

1.3 Defining Terms

Choice programs

The term ‘choice program’ needs to be clearly defined for the purposes of this review. In the literature surveyed to date, there does not appear to be a consensus regarding definitions of ‘choice programs,’ ‘alternative programs,’ and ‘school choice.’ In some of the literature these terms are used interchangeably, while other sources make a distinction between these types of programs. School boards and government documents use varying words to identify and define choice programs, sometimes using the terms differently even within their own materials. For example, both the Surrey School District in British Columbia, and the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board in Ontario use the term ‘Program of Choice’ to refer to a range of specialty programs such as French Immersion, Intensive French, arts/outdoor programs, and sports academies. In contrast, these programs would be defined as ‘alternative programs’ if using the Alberta School Act (2000) definition:

“an education program that (a) emphasizes a particular language, culture, religion or subject-matter, or (b) uses a particular teaching philosophy, but that is not a special education program, a program referred to in section 10 or a program of religious education offered by a separate school board.”

The Calgary Board of Education, meanwhile, parallels the Alberta School Act definition, but defines its use of the word ‘alternative’ as referring to “programs that are based on language of instruction, cultural emphasis, subject matter and/or teaching and learning methodology” (Calgary Board of Education, 2011).

In British Columbia, the School Act does not offer a definition for alternative or choice programs, leaving district level school boards to create their own definitions. Perhaps this is a reason for the lack of clarity on the part of some B.C. school districts when referring to choice and/or alternative programs. For example, the Vancouver Board of Education (VBE) uses the term “alternative programs” as an umbrella term to describe both “programs of choice” as well “programs that respond to [learning] needs” (Vancouver School Board, 2011a). Such inconsistency in the way groups use and define particular terms has proven challenging for our research team. Indeed, from the very beginning of our research, the divergent meanings attributed to such specific terms as "alternative" and "choice" have made it difficult for our group to determine the exact nature of programs being referenced in numerous articles and documents. At the same time, this inconsistency has served to highlight the multiple ways choice is currently conceived of and used in educational research and policy.

While there are many different ways of using the words ‘alternative’ and ‘choice,’ this review adopts the Alberta School Act definition of an alternative program because of its clarity and comprehensiveness. However, for the purpose of this review, we are substituting the term ‘choice’ in place of ‘alternative’ because it refers more specifically to the type of programs this review seeks to examine. Therefore, we define ‘choice program’ as “an education program, offered in a public education system, that emphasizes a particular language, culture, religion or subject-matter, or uses a particular teaching philosophy.”

Because much of the literature available on choice in education is from the U.S. where magnet schools (public schools offering a special program) and charter schools (independent public schools of choice) are popular, this definition allows us to include literature about both these types of school choice.

As in the Alberta School Act definition, we are not including special education programs in our definition of a choice program. While this may be an interesting and important issue, these are not the type of programs we have found addressed in the literature on issues of equity and choice in education. Nor are they the types of programs that appear to be increasing in public school districts according to the literature we have reviewed. Furthermore, as three of our group members are situated within the VBE, distinguishing special needs programs from other programs of choice is in keeping with our local school board's own definition: in the VBE, students must be referred by school staff based on an identified learning need but programs of choice are available to all students in the district (Vancouver School Board, 2011b). Our primary interest is on issues of equity surrounding choice programs that purport to be accessible to all students.

Equity

The term equity is also difficult to define. In his attempt to provide a working definition of equity for the purpose of social policy, Levin (2003) points to the longtime struggle to define it, and even suggests that although “we cannot define what it is, we know when we are far from it” (p.5). Not only is it challenging to define, but there is wide variation in the literature we have reviewed in how the term is used. As discussed above, some authors use equity as an argument for increased choice in public education (Friedman, 1955; Coons & Sugarman, 1971, 1990),

while others (Apple, 2001, 2004; Ball & Lund, 2010; Yoon & Gulson, 2010) use their conception of the term equity to critique choice policies.

In her case study examining the opening of an arts based program in British Columbia, Gaskell (2002) identifies that “underlying the debate are fundamentally different conceptions of what equity entails” (p. 50). Johnston (2010) also points to an underlying difference in definition in her analysis of the debate surrounding the idea of separate “Africentric” schools in Canada, i.e. “Black-focused,” though not exclusively for students of African descent (p. 126). She suggests “that all sides are in favour of equal education, but are working within different paradigms of equality” (p. 107). While Johnston uses the word equality, the discussion could be understood within a framework of equity. This points to another challenge in the literature: the conflation of the terms equity and equality.

Equity is often used interchangeably with the term equality (Bronfenbrenner, 1973; Espinoza, 2007). Espinoza (2007) examines the debate in the literature on ‘equity’ and ‘equality’ and affirms that it “reveals disagreement and confusion about what those concepts really mean and what they involve in terms of goals and results” (p. 343). Adding to the confusion, he concludes the definitions and terms are frequently used interchangeably.

There is, however, an important distinction between these two terms. As Corson (2001, as cited in Espinoza, 2007) explains, “The ‘equity’ concept is associated with fairness or justice in the provision of education or other benefits and it takes individual circumstances into consideration, while ‘equality’ usually connotes sameness in treatment by asserting the fundamental or natural equality of all persons” (p. 345). Simply put, equity means something is fair, while equality means it is the same. Gaskell (2002) adds that “Equity requires some similarity of treatment, but it also involves recognizing difference in appropriate ways” (p. 50).

As such, “more ‘equity’ may mean less ‘equality’” (Rawls, 1971 and Gans, 1973 as cited in Espinoza, 2007, p. 346). In other words, increasing fairness (or equity) for one group or individual may therefore mean not providing for them in the *same* way, but instead providing something different.

There is obviously much debate around the meaning and use of the terms equity and equality. For our review, we found the work of Levin (2003) and Reimer (2005) provided useful working definitions. In discussing equity regarding education, Levin (2003) identifies two main dimensions: “equality of opportunity” and “equality of results.” The first concerns access to education while the second addresses the participation and success of learners, especially in light of the fact that particular groups of learners “have tended to experience lower levels of participation and success in all areas of education” (p.7). A further extension of this definition is found in the work of Reimer (2005) who identifies two main sources of inequity in order to help define equity: “those arising from the education system’s structure and practices, and those arising from the student’s ethno-cultural and socioeconomic context” (p.2). He also identifies a trilogy of elements framing his discussion on equity in education:

1. Equity of resources (supports, finances, taxes);
2. Equity in process (the school experience, program, content, access);
3. Equity of outcomes (learning achieved, impacts on later life).

We find this framework clear, specific, and relevant to the issue of choice in public education, and so, for the purposes of this review, we will identify issues of equity in education using Reimer’s trilogy of elements.

1.4 Application to a local context

This review not only examines the current academic literature on choice programs, but also applies our findings to a local context. After identifying and synthesizing both thematic commonalities and inconsistencies in the research, our team examined the admissions process and criteria for a choice program within the Vancouver Board of Education (VBE).

As a local context, Vancouver represents a backdrop where policies and programs of marketization over the past few decades have gradually transformed the public school system (Yoon, 2011). Following legislation that introduced public funding to non-public schools, the number of non-public schools in British Columbia increased as did their enrollment, with the majority of these schools located in Vancouver (Federation of Independent Schools Association, 2010 as cited in Yoon, 2011). The Vancouver Board of Education has since adopted policies of choice including open catchment area boundaries as well as the expansion of a wide range of choice programs. Among these programs, secondary school Mini School programs have proliferated, from being non-existent before the 1970s to the 27 Mini School programs currently operating within the VBE (Yoon, 2011). From these programs, the Byng Arts Mini School program and its publicly accessible online admissions process provides the model to which we apply our findings.

We chose this program because it clearly fit within our definition of a choice program as a specialty program offered within the public education system. Furthermore, three of our members work for the VBE, and we wanted to look at an example from our own district in order to provide a specific local example with which to further conversation on choice programs and issues of equity. Finally, one intermediate teacher in our research team has had several students

over the past years apply to the Byng Arts program and therefore has had experience with the admissions process.

The decision to apply our research findings to a local context was in order to determine how closely the research relates to possible issues of equity regarding this choice program. In what ways do the overarching themes within the literature align with or contradict a local experience with choice in the Vancouver school district? Furthermore, by applying our findings to our own local context, we are acknowledging our reflexivity with regard to the research (Willig, 2001). Indeed, not only as researchers, but perhaps more significantly as Vancouver teachers with our own varying experiences with choice programs, we cannot position ourselves outside of this systematic review of the literature. Thus, this local context provides us with a reflexive lens through which to reflect upon our findings and understand any underlying assumptions we may have.

2. Methods

2.1 Being systematic

Through a systematic search, we identified academic articles to review and analyze in accordance with our research question. We looked at literature that examines school choice programs and issues of equity. The Systematic Literature Review (SLR) gives us a methodological framework that provides us with a wide range of the current academic literature available concerning our research question. In order to foster validity and objectivity we followed the process described below for making decisions regarding the literature we chose to examine.

Reflexivity

At every stage of the research, we have reflected and revisited our decision-making processes and our construction of shared meanings: how did we decide on the definition of our search terms? Why did we exclude certain types of choice from our study? How are the definitions we gave related to our own experiences and backgrounds? According to Malterud (2001) “a researcher’s background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged more adequate for this purpose, the findings considered more appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions” (p. 483-484). From the beginning of our study, we shared narratives of our locations, beliefs and values as teachers, researchers and individuals with each other.

As a result of our different backgrounds and locations, our individual experiences are varied regarding choice programs within public education. As stated above, two members of our team are teachers within a choice program, one has experienced a choice program indirectly at his school, and one is a teacher at a choice school. Whenever perspectives have collided, we

have engaged in respectful dialogue with the intent to draw out an understanding of our beliefs and values. By being reflexive about our own preconceptions as individuals and as a group, we can provide a transparent study. As such, our team acknowledges that our understandings may lead us to conclusions that differ from those of other studies.

Collaboration

Our team adopted an open collaborative approach in which we felt comfortable challenging each others' assumptions and biases. The very strength of our collaboration was rooted within our varied perspectives and backgrounds regarding choice. Indeed, the diversity in our locations enriched the shared meanings that emerged during the research stages of this review. For example, in the beginning, the aims and methods of our research and the potential significance of our study was the focus of our debate. The very method we chose (SLR), was ultimately agreed upon by all members of our team. Together we reached the conclusion that a SLR would be the most useful tool for a research-based understanding of the issues of equity related to choice programs. Building from these early stages, important methodological decisions such as defining terms, setting inclusion/exclusion criteria and establishing coding strategies have been approved by all members of our team.

Audit trails

For our project, we kept "audit trails" in a Reflexivity Journal in the form of typed notes from our group meetings and discussions, identifying areas we have discussed, debated, and argued about, in order to keep track of how we came to make our decisions. The files were saved in electronic documents according to the date of each meeting. These discussions have not only highlighted our diverse understandings of equity and choice, but also tracked our construction of shared meanings as our comprehension of the issues expanded. Our team

systematically used and reviewed our audit trails to reflect upon our decision making, in order to ensure consistency, transparency and accountability,

2.2 Methods

This paper uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) in order to investigate the issues of equity in choice programs within the context of public education. A SLR is "a literature review following a rigorous, transparent and reproducible process, which aims to identify, select, appraise, analyze and synthesize, in a systematic and comprehensive way, research evidence on a specific research topic" (Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011). Informed by literature on SLR's (Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011; Becheikh, Ziam, Idrissi, Castonguay, & Landry, 2010), we outlined several stages for our review: 1) Identifying the research question and conceptual framing, 2) determining inclusion/exclusion criteria, 3) developing search strategies, 4) determining relevant literature, 5) assessing for relevancy, 6) coding articles based on research methods and themes, 7) summarizing and synthesizing results, and 8) interpreting the results.

2.3 Search strategy and inclusion/exclusion criteria

First, we identified possible terms for our search. Based on the volume and relevancy of those results, we narrowed our list to the following key search terms:

Table 2.1: Key search terms

CONCEPT A <i>Choice</i>	CONCEPT B <i>Social Justice</i>	CONCEPT C <i>Locations</i>
Choice programs	Equity	Canada
Alternative programs	Segregation	
School choice	Inequity	
Dual track	Stratification	
	Social class	

	Socioeconomic	
	Equality	
	Inequality	

We identified relevant databases with the help of experts in the educational field: *ERIC (EBSCO)*, *Education Research Complete*, *Education Index Full Text*, *PsycInfo*, *Communication and Mass Media Complete*, and *CBCA Complete*. Using these indexes and databases through the University of British Columbia library, we searched the terms from Column A individually, and in combination with the terms from Column B in the following Boolean phrasing: “choice program” OR “alterative program” OR “school choice” OR “dual track” AND “equity” AND “inequity” AND “segregation” AND “socioeconomic” AND “social class” AND “stratification” AND “equality” AND “inequality”. This first round of searching resulted in 544 articles. The titles and abstracts of these articles were then reviewed together by all four members of the research team and sorted using the following inclusion/exclusion criteria:

- Program level: literature was included if the focus was on a program offered within a K-12 public education system.
- Geographic location: literature examining a North American context (only Canada and/or U.S.) was included.
- Choice program: literature regarding programs that fit within our definition of a choice program was included, regardless of whether the authors of the article used the specific term ‘choice program.’
- Time period: literature published between 2001 and 2011 was included.
- Type of publication: peer-reviewed literature, written and published in English, was included. Due to time constraints we excluded books, theses and dissertations.

After the preliminary search, we were concerned by the absence of Canadian literature.

Because of the importance of having a Canadian perspective within our research, we conducted

a secondary search adding a third term, “Canada”, which resulted in 96 additional articles bringing our total number of articles for further review to 640.

At all stages of the search and selection process, if we were uncertain about whether the article fully met our criteria, or there was significant debate among team members, we erred on the side of inclusion.

2.4 Identification of studies

We first applied our inclusion/exclusion criteria to the reading of titles and abstracts only, resulting in a disqualification of 512 articles from the original 640 articles found. A total of 128 articles were chosen for further analysis. Once we eliminated duplicates, a total of 123 articles remained.

At this stage, each member of the research team individually reviewed the titles and abstracts more thoroughly and created a list of articles for inclusion. The team then compared results, and discussed any articles around which there was debate. This resulted in a selection of 59 articles.

The next step in the research process was to retrieve selected articles. With the exception of two articles, all other articles were accessible online. We saved an electronic copy of each article, tracking its origin and saving references in an online reference management system (RefWorks).

2.5 Secondary inclusion/exclusion of articles

The team divided into two, with each pair taking 29/30 articles to read and apply the inclusion/exclusion criteria more meticulously in order to exclude articles unsuitable for our research question. i.e. articles that did not include a discussion on choice programs, issues of equity, or were not within the context of public education. Upon the reading of the whole article,

and by comparing the selection of articles with each member of the team, 15 articles were excluded and 44 articles were selected for further analysis.

2.6 Coding, review and analysis of articles

Once we had the 44 articles selected, our team developed criteria for assessing the relevancy of the literature. This criteria was based on the three key concepts as defined by our research focus: choice programs, equity, and public education. For this purpose, we created a relevancy rubric to determine which articles would be analyzed and coded based on research methods and themes. Each conceptual category was given a rating of 3, 2, or 1 from most to least relevant (see rubric, Figure 2.3). To determine which articles were eligible for methodological and thematic coding, articles required a score of two or greater in each of the three concepts.

Figure 2.2: The flow of literature

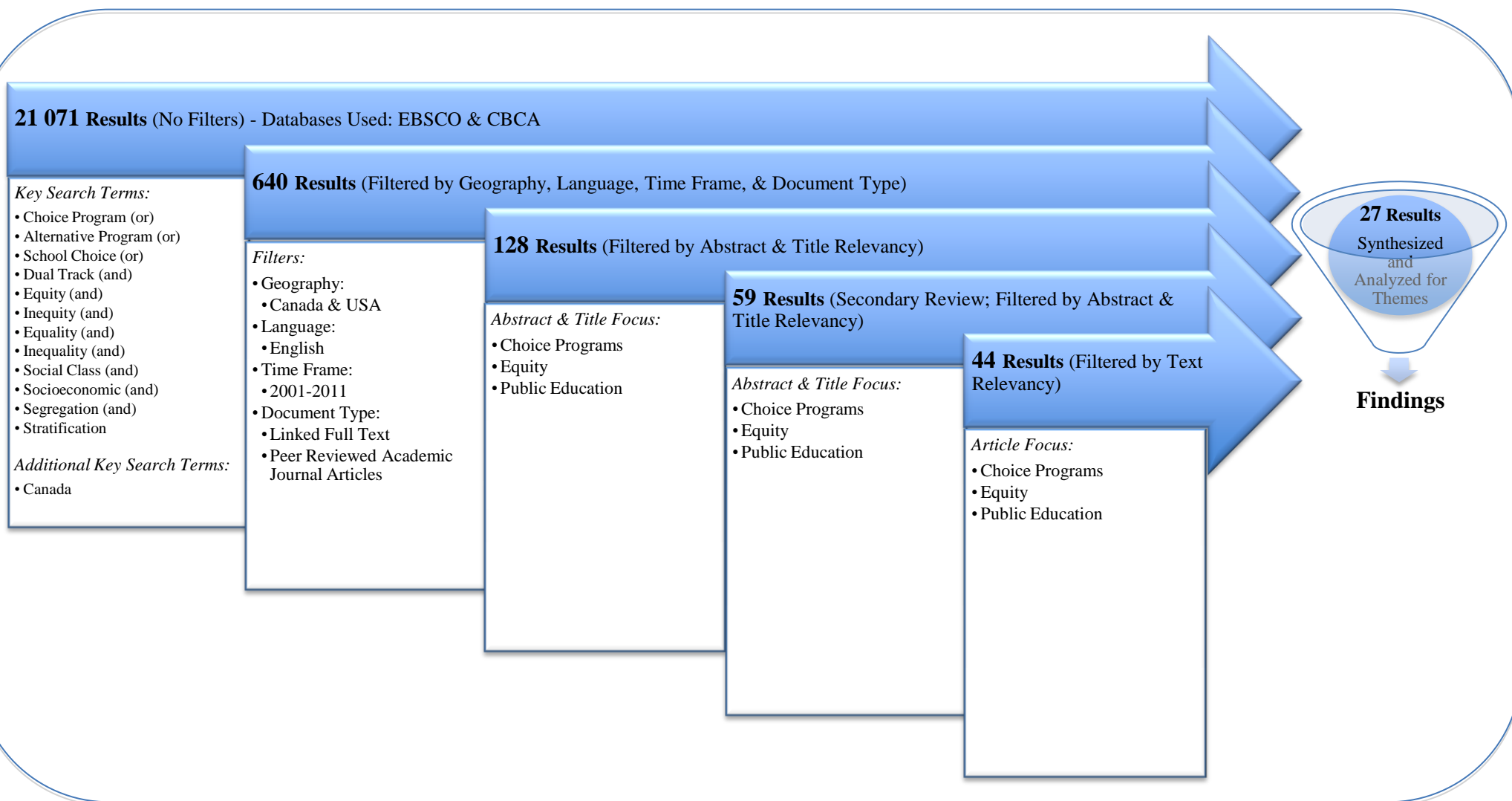


Figure 2.3: Relevancy rubric

Ranking (out of three)	★★★ (3)	★★ (2)	★ (1)
<p><i>Extent to which the research focus is on choice programs, as defined by this review:</i></p> <p><i>“an education program, offered in a public education system, that emphasizes a particular language, culture, religion or subject-matter, or uses a particular teaching philosophy.”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The research focus is solely on choice programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The research focus is on choice programs in conjunction with other forms of educational choice (e.g. open boundaries, private/independent schools, private school vouchers, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The research focus is on educational choice, but is not focused on choice programs
Ranking (out of three)	★★★ (3)	★★ (2)	★ (1)
<p><i>Extent to which the research focus is on issues of equity</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The research focus is solely on issues of equity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The research has multiple foci, including, but not limited to, issues of equity (e.g. history of school choice, school policy, accountability, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The research references equity, but is not focused on issues of equity
Ranking (out of three)	★★★ (3)	★★ (2)	★ (1)
<p><i>Extent to which the research focus is on issues within the context of public education</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The research focus is solely within the context of public education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The research focus includes multiple contexts, including, but not limited to, the context of public education (e.g. private, independent, home school, online, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The research references public education, but is not focused within the context of public education

After scoring for relevancy, we selected 27 articles for inclusion our analysis. The articles were divided into two groups, and each set was coded by two team members using the Coding Assessment Chart as a guideline (see Appendix A). For each study, the author, date of publication, research focus, method, findings, and context was recorded, and themes relating to choice and

issues of equity were extracted. Furthermore, a code was developed to note if the themes were thoroughly addressed or only briefly discussed.

Within pairs, coding was then compared to ensure reliability and accurate extraction of themes. At least one sample from each set was read and coded by the other pair of researchers as well in order to crosscheck for similarity of coding results. The dominant themes of each article were then organized according to our adopted three-part definition of equity (of resource, process, or outcome), in order to identify commonalities, divergences, and gaps within the literature. (See Appendix B for Table 2.5: Table of themes in the literature reviewed.)

We acknowledge that this framework has limitations. Some themes do not easily fit into the trilogy, nor does this organization easily allow for exploration of underlying frameworks and discourses of the articles (e.g. neoliberal agenda). However, given the focus of this review on issues of equity and choice programs in public education, we found it the most useful method through which to understand the many themes and ideologies that emerged in the literature. Themes or other notable characteristics that did not fit within one of the three sections were recorded in our research, but not ultimately included in our reported Research Findings due to focus of this review.

Finally, we applied our findings to a local context by examining the admission procedures to the Byng Arts Mini School program in the Vancouver Board of Education. For this, we looked at publically available information on the school's website: <http://byng.vsb.bc.ca/byngarts>. We then applied the dominant themes uncovered in our studies to the information and procedures detailed on the website.

2.7 Strengths and limitations

The primary strength of this review lies in the method itself, which offers a rigorous, transparent and reproducible process to review the published academic literature on our subject. Another key strength of this review is the intensive discussion necessary amongst the research team members in order to achieve common understandings of definitions and terms. One limitation was the challenge of defining choice programs. We are aware that our definition of a choice program necessarily limits and excludes other literature. The very nature of a SLR also means it is limited by the existing literature there is to review. Our review is further limited by the databases available through the UBC library and by the fugitive literature and websites we excluded due to time and resource constraints of this particular project.

Our research team also experienced difficulty consistently reproducing some of the search results that were based on the EBSCO database searches, despite our systematic approach. In conducting our research we discovered that EBSCO permalinks do not keep filter preferences; they only keep search items. Moreover, even when we re-entered all our filters, there existed inconsistencies in our result findings (a difference between 511 and 553 articles). While we were ultimately able to reproduce our results (511), we were unable to explain the variation produced by the EBSCO search engine. Thus, in ways that were beyond our control, we acknowledge the possibility that some relevant articles may have been excluded from this review.

3. Research Findings

3.1 Overview

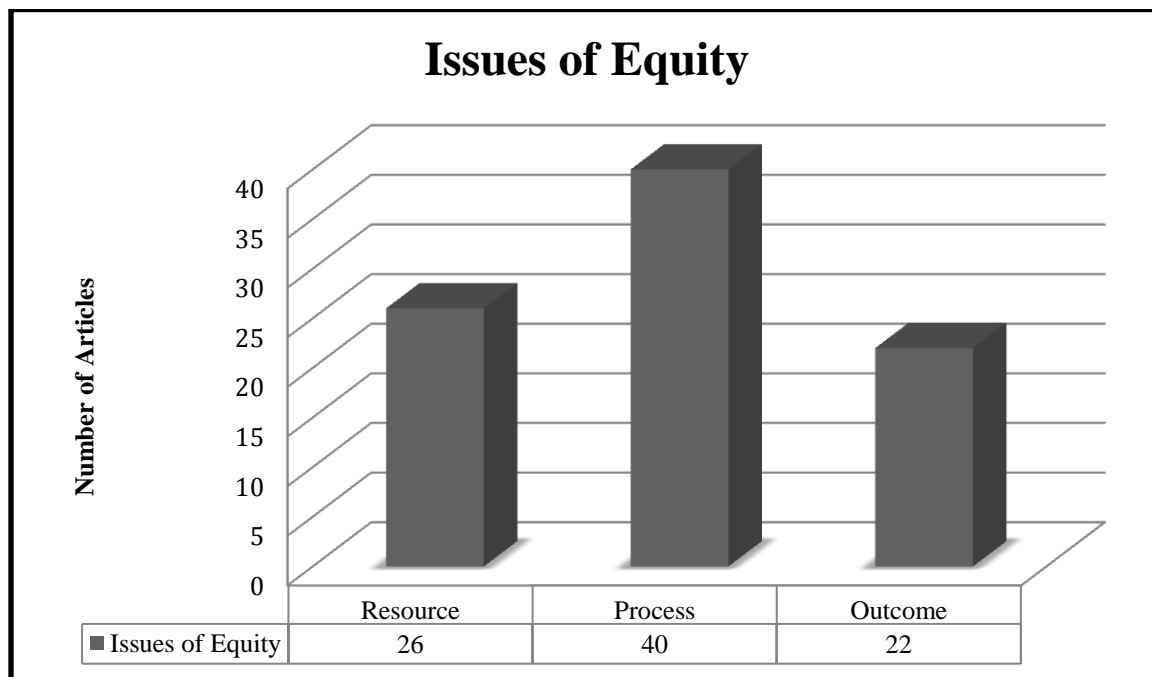
The purpose of this review is to analyze the current literature on choice programs with the aim of exploring issues of equity. From this analysis, an overarching finding that emerges is the complex nature of choice itself. As our research team delved deeper into the literature, it became apparent that we must move beyond a limited market-model debate in order to gain a greater understanding of the role choice plays in education. Indeed, choice and its underlying nuances can be framed and interpreted in many ways -- interpretations often shaped by a combination of varying ideological, social, political, geographical, and historical contexts. Upon analysis however, dominant themes did rise from the literature. This chapter identifies those themes, compares and contrasts U.S. and Canadian research, identifies notable gaps within the literature reviewed, and applies our findings to a local context.

3.2 Dominant themes

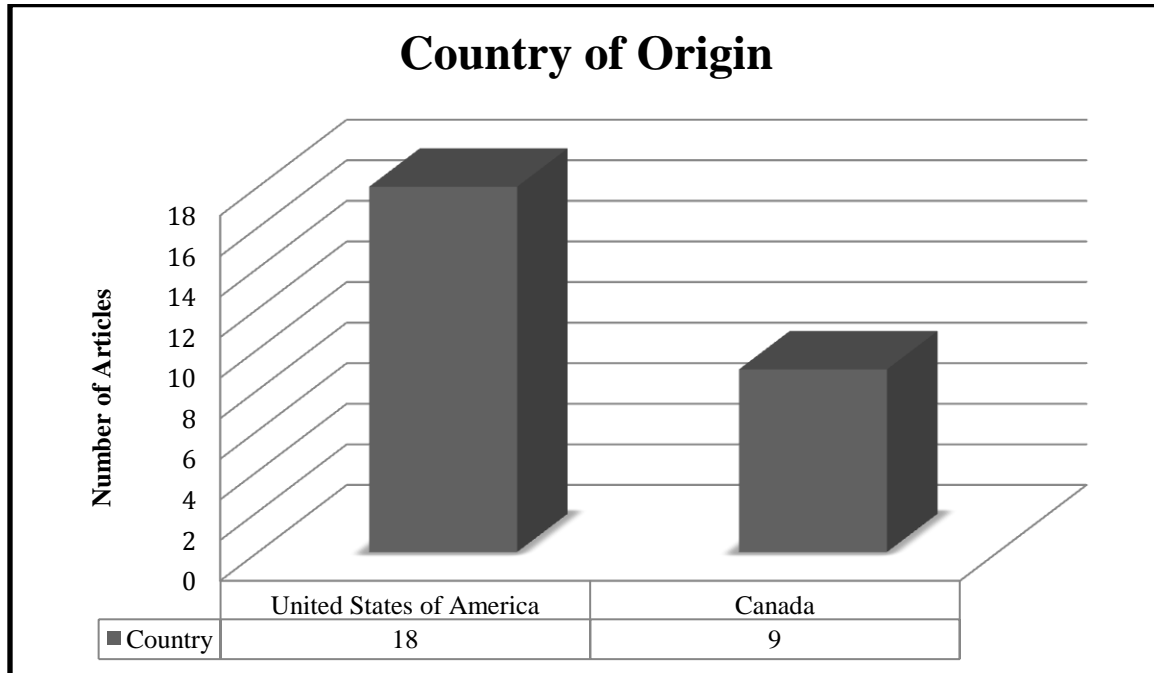
Having situated our research within Reimer's three branches of equity (resource, process, and outcome), we applied the same framework to help us recognize and organize key themes present in the literature. Classifying emergent themes in this way enhanced our ability to understand and recognize common patterns, and ensured our focus remained on our research statement. While we acknowledge this artificial separation masks the interconnected nature of these forms of equity, we nonetheless find it a beneficial and useful construct to view and analyze the literature. Graph 3.1 illustrates the aggregate frequency with which particular types of equity appeared as key, central themes. Because each article often focused on numerous issues of equity, the total number of issues surpasses the number of articles. Graph 3.2 provides a further breakdown of the articles, showing how our particular combination of search terms and filters

returned a majority (67%) of U.S. based literature. Graph 3.3 illustrates how, despite a noticeable spike of U.S. articles in 2002, most of our articles were evenly spaced across our ten-year time parameter. We surmise the surge of articles in 2002 may reflect the marked concern felt over the *No Child Left Behind Act* passed the previous year. In brief, the legislation requires schools to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), performing progressively better on successive annual standardized tests. Schools failing to make AYP for two years face the loss of students due to state-sanctioned transfer options, while schools failing to make AYP for five successive years face the threat of reconstitution, closure, or transformation into a charter or other privately administered school (Manwaring, 2010). While NCLB was not a focus in most of our articles, it regularly framed the context for many of the U.S. based authors.

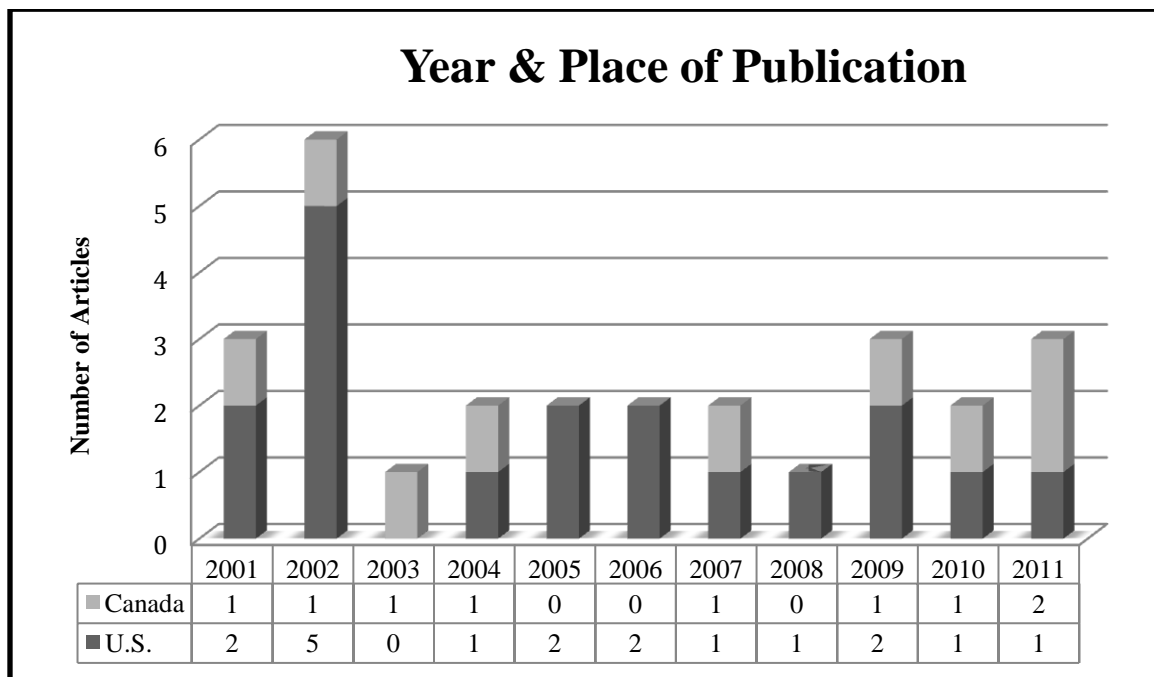
Graph 3.1



Graph 3.2



Graph 3.3



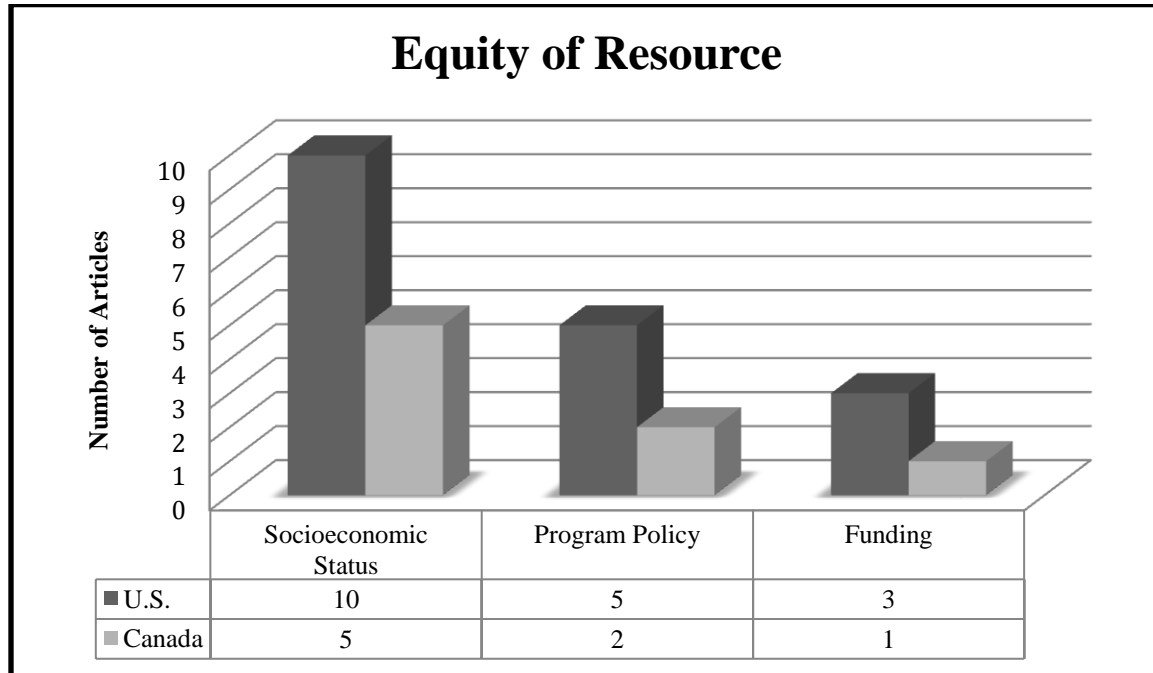
Equity of resource: socioeconomic status

It is useful here to review in brief, what each form of equity means. In this paper, equity of resource refers to all the resources available, or unavailable, to a school, including financial resources, (government and/or private funding), political resources (government support and/or policies), and family resources (personal, social, and/or cultural capital).

In the end we found socioeconomic status (SES) to be a dominant theme to emerge across all types of equity, and particularly equity of resource (see Graph 3.4). Indeed, more than half of the articles (15) focused on this topic. Although individual authors centered on specific components of SES, we found no aspect to be mutually exclusive. Subthemes of SES included: income level (Bosetti, 2004; Davies & Aurini, 2011); education level (Bosetti, 2004; Bifulco, Ladd, & Ross, 2009); racial background (Henig & MacDonald, 2002; Renzulli & Evans, 2005); class (Taylor & Woollard, 2003; Rosenbloom, 2009); language (Yoon & Gulson, 2010; André-Bechely, 2007); and culture (Makropoulos, 2009a; 2009b).

Also consistent throughout the literature was the interplay of these various attributes and how they collectively gave those of higher SES more opportunity to recognize, understand, and participate in educational choice. Moreover, individuals and families with higher SES were more likely to actually engage in educational choice (Tedin & Weiher, 2004; Davies & Aurini, 2011).

Graph 3.4

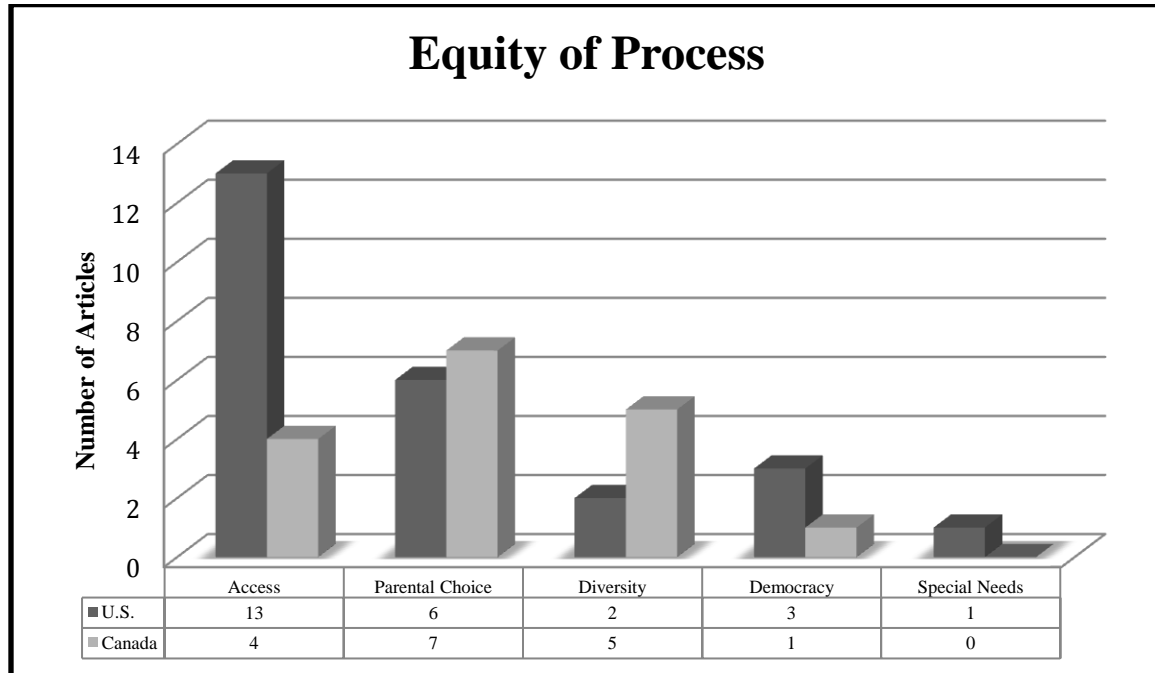


Equity of process: access and parent rationale

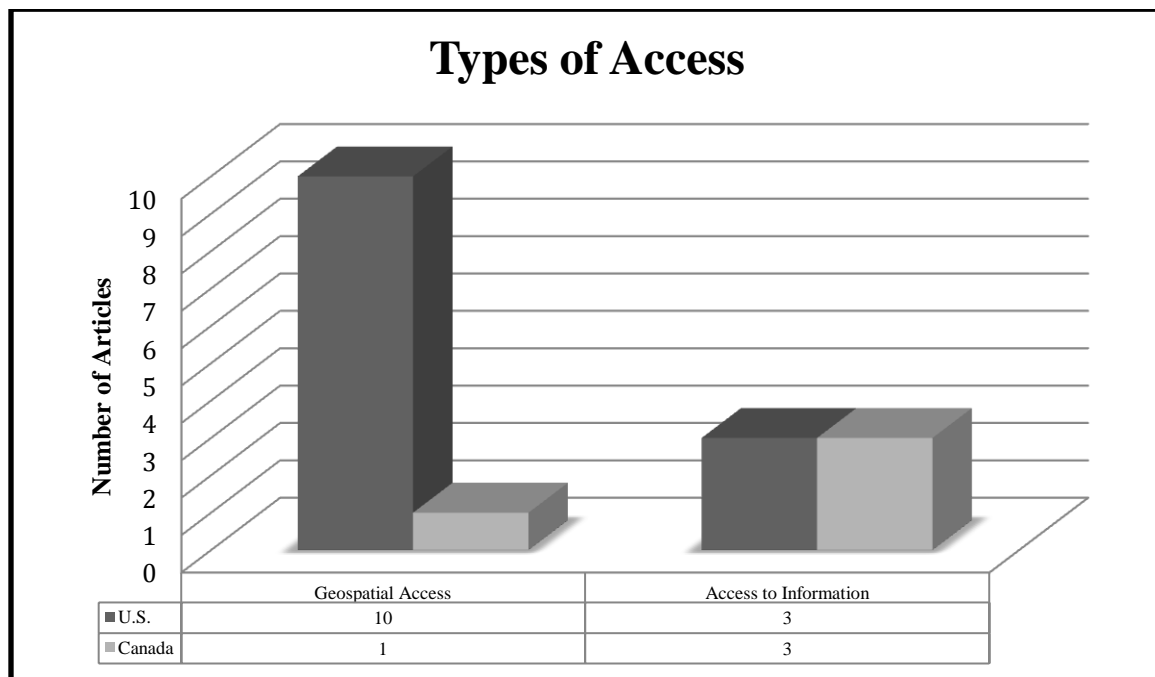
Equity of process refers to all the ways families experience, or do not experience, schools and programs. This includes how students gain (or do not gain) access to particular schools and/or programs, how content is designed and implemented, and how families are perceived/treated within school communities.

In this section we discovered various links between the three forms of equity, the most notable being that of SES and issues of access. In many ways, SES is the foundation of most equity of process issues, affecting families' abilities to access programs of choice due to geospatial realities and access to quality information,

Graph 3.5



Graph 3.6



Geospatial access

Geospatial access is a complex term concerned with the relative location of families and schools. Multiple geospatial factors affect access to choice programs including distance from choice schools (an issue of transportation, finance, and time), and neighbourhood SES levels (an issue of school demographics). For example, several authors raised the issue of “creaming” or “skimming” in relation to choice program location (Betebenner, Howe, & Foster, 2005; Henig & MacDonald, 2002; Howe & Welner, 2002; Renzulli & Evans, 2005). Creaming or skimming refers to choice programs intentionally or unintentionally targeting and/or selecting preferred students, usually the highest achievers or those “most easily educated” (Henig & MacDonald, 2002, p. 964), and taking them away from neighbourhood public schools. For example, authors Henig and MacDonald (2002) found that charter schools in Washington, D.C. were more likely to locate in areas characterized by middle-class minorities, resulting in a skimming effect.

Similarly, André-Bechely (2007) found that educational choice in Los Angeles was constrained by parental concerns/abilities surrounding geography and distance. Working and middle-class parents, both African-American and white, who succeeded in accessing schools of choice (charter and/or magnet schools), often felt compelled to refuse enrollment because of transportation issues. For many of these families, the means of travel were either unaffordable (personal vehicles and/or public transit), unsafe (e.g. waiting unsupervised at a downtown bus stop), or simply too time consuming (sometimes involving more than two hours of travel a day).

Access to information

SES also affected how, and if, families accessed and used information. Bosetti (2004) found that families with middle-to-high SES were likely to engage in researching information about prospective schools, and were also more likely to enroll in choice schools and programs. In

contrast, families with low SES were unmotivated to search for information regarding schools of any type (public, choice, private), and were less likely to enroll their children in choice programs. Furthermore, Schneider and Buckley (2002), Taylor and Woollard (2003), and Davies and Aurini (2011), all discovered that parents possessing higher levels of education were more likely to research and select programs of choice. A related issue was the confusing and complex nature of admission requirements and procedures. Both Rosenbloom (2009) and Schneider and Buckley (2002) highlighted the disadvantages that families of lower SES face when navigating this process. These limitations included issues such as language, transportation, time, as well as economic and technological resources.

Parent rationale

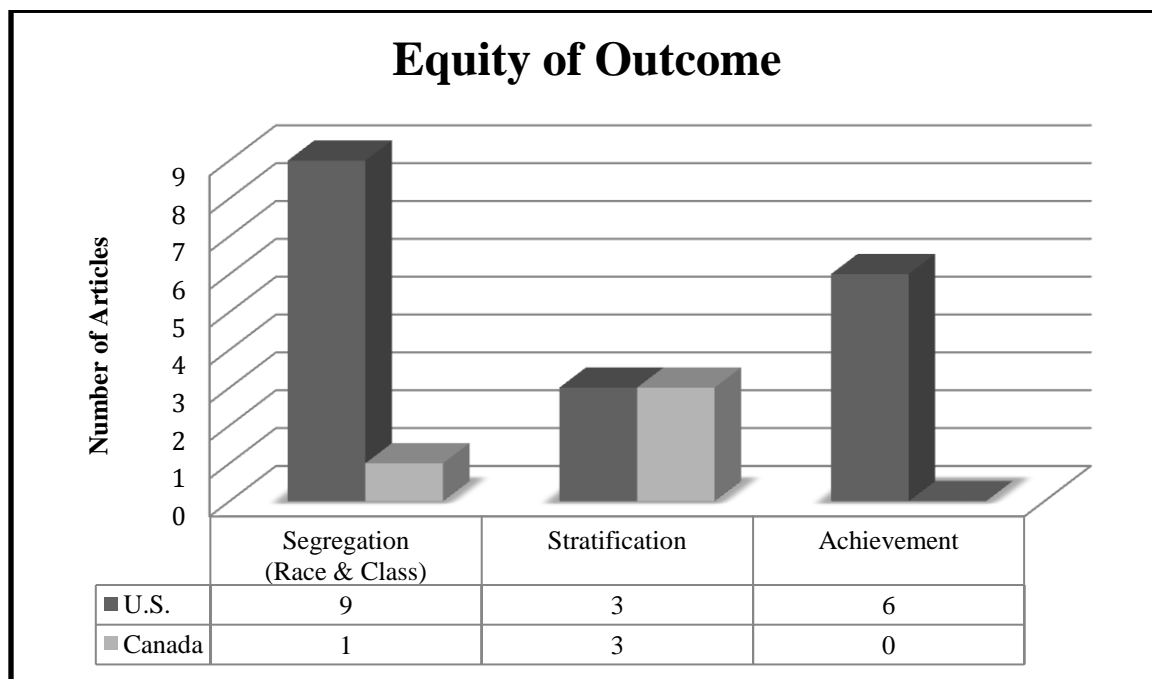
Parent rationale addresses *why* families access choice schools and programs. Receiving the second highest frequency rating after SES, parent rationale was a dominant theme in 13 articles (7 Canadian and 6 U.S.). While parent rationale as a whole was a dominant theme, it included a variety of elements. There were no simple patterns to draw out because so many context-based factors were at play: racial and class demographics (Schneider & Buckley, 2002); location (André-Bechely, 2007); culture, language, and immigrant perspective (Makropoulos, 2009a); academic quality (Tedin & Weiher, 2004); safety and a nurturing environment (Chapman & Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011); school reputation and personal friends (Betebenner et al., 2005); participation within a specific community (Yoon & Gulson, 2010); and, parent demand (Gaskell, 2001). More than half of the articles highlighted the interplay between these rationales, with only one (Tedin & Weiher, 2004), suggesting choice was primarily based on academics. Nonetheless, throughout all the articles, choice was consistently shown as a complex decision-making process, involving many

factors that were themselves, each affected by the numerous, seemingly inseparable, aspects of SES.

Equity of outcome: segregation and stratification

Equity of outcome refers to the learning achieved by students in school, as well as the impact such learning has on students' future lives. One connection that emerged as we reviewed the literature was that equity of outcome not only impacted, but was also impacted by, the interaction between equity of resource and equity of process. That being said, a dominant theme did emerge within equity of outcome: segregation by race and class (see Graph 3.6).

Graph 3.7



Race and class

In most cases, though not exclusively, race and class were integrated in their impact on segregation. In particular we saw the impact race and class (two key aspects of SES) and geographical location had on school composition. Taylor and Woollard (2003) found that middle-class families were in a better position to access programs of choice than were families of lower

SES background. They also found that choices, even among high-school students, were nuanced according to racial demographics. According to Viteritti (2010), a high number of charter schools are located in urban centers, resulting in a disproportionate percentage of minority enrollment – a trend which many white, middle-class families feel apprehensive about (Taylor & Woollard, 2003). Bifulco et al., (2009) also found that parents in Durham, North Carolina, specifically those who possessed a higher level of education (college or greater), were more likely to choose charter and magnet schools that were more homogenous in terms of class and race (a trend that increased as students became older). Likewise, Chapman and Antrop-Gonzalez (2011) and Renzulli and Evans (2005) found that the option of school choice and choice programs in several U.S. urban centres resulted in “white flight,” as well as “black middle-class flight.” Because the cost of buying a house in the suburbs is financially unattainable for most urbanites (especially those of a minority race), the demographics of urban and suburban schools are consistently segregated by both class and race.

Finally, André-Bechely (2007) reports how a court-ordered mandate aimed at creating racially balanced magnet schools in a Los Angeles district (30-40% white and 60-70% African-American), automatically gave statistical preference to whites because fewer of them lived in large metropolitan areas. Thus, while the intention of magnet schools has been associated with social and racial integration (Archbald, 2004; Linkow, 2011; Ryan & Heise, 2002), the effects of magnet schools have often been quite different.

3.3 Comparing U.S. and Canadian literature

Our SLR resulted in 18 U.S. articles and 9 Canadian articles. While there were many differences between each literature set, several similarities emerged as well. First of all, several U.S. studies referred to national level political frameworks when discussing issues around policies,

such as the *No Child Left behind Act* (André-Bechely, 2007; Betebenner et al., 2005; Lawton, 2006; Lubienski, 2007) and the desegregation of schools (Betebenner et al., 2005; Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Bifulco et al., 2009). In contrast, Canadian articles discussed school choice policies and educational reform from more local provincial level and school board perspectives (Taylor & Mackay, 2008; Gaskell, 2001, 2002; Bosetti, 2004). While U.S. studies were mainly focused on charter schools, vouchers and magnet programs, Canadian studies focused mainly on intra-district and inter-district choice options and referred to programs such as French Immersion (Makropoulos, 2009b), arts (Gaskell, 2002), and Aboriginal programs (Taylor & Mackay, 2008). Furthermore, none of the Canadian literature reviewed focused on choice programs and their impact on academic achievement. Indeed, any connection between choice and academic performance was limited to U.S. literature. Within this literature, U.S. authors reported there has been little proof that school choice improves academic achievement (Betebenner et al., 2005; Lawton, 2006; Viteritti, 2001; Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Marron, 2002; Ryan & Heise, 2002). We were surprised by this finding due to the long-running association between choice and academic quality as claimed by predominant U.S. choice advocates (Friedman, 1955; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Coons & Sugarman, 1990).

Throughout our literature review, the theme of segregation was more prominent in the U.S. literature. Eight U.S. authors discussed segregation by class and/or race, while only one Canadian discussed segregation by race. In U.S. studies, authors used the term “segregation” to describe the separation between children of different races or classes attending different schools. A larger proportion of Canadian articles discussed this separation in terms of stratification, suggesting a hierarchical or vertical division, and was not focused specifically on race, but rather based on language or various ethnicities due to immigrant communities. Stratification, as used by Yoon and

Gulson (2010), suggests the dominance of a certain race, class, or ability over another within the same school or district. Both Canadian and U.S. articles discussed stratification by class, race and ability. It is possible that the difference in using these terms in U.S. and Canada stems from the different historical contexts of each country, but such an analysis is beyond the scope of this research.

Regardless of whether they were for or against choice, U.S. authors framed their research and arguments within a framework of markets. We surmise that this framing could reflect values of freedom, liberty, and equality that are embedded within the U.S. national and historical context. In contrast, diversity was a more prominent feature of Canadian literature, perhaps reflecting the pluralistic nature of Canadian national identity. Authors such as Taylor and Woollard (2003), Taylor and Mackay (2008), and Gaskell (2002) use the term diversity to refer to different types of schooling or programs of choice and Gaskell further relates the concept of diversity in schooling to Canadian themes of multiculturalism and pluralism. She also actively rejects the market metaphor, finding that it limits the debate in education, and intentionally positions her discussion of school choice within a framework of equity and diversity (1999). Gaskell connects the discussion around diversity to notions of equity, suggesting that choice programs have the potential to not only meet the educational needs of students, but to recognize the cultural needs of the community as well (2001). This contrasts with the traditional market-based argument that connects choice with improved educational quality. In recognizing the diverse needs of students, Gaskell's suggestion that choice programs are in fact the most equitable approach to public education provides an interesting argument for choice programs as a means to combat inequities in the current public education system.

Another difference between the Canadian and U.S. literature is found in the analysis of geospatial issues of access in education. While only one Canadian article (Davies & Aurini, 2011) mentioned issues related to transportation and residence, five U.S. articles studied these issues. This could be reflective of differences in infrastructure and other characteristics (e.g. levels of poverty, demographics, urban planning) between U.S. and Canadian urban centres.

Despite differences in program types and the history of segregation and stratification, several dominant links emerged between choice programs and inequity in both Canadian and U.S. literature. Both U.S. and Canadian literature focused on urban contexts, with the exception of one article, Ryan and Heise (2002), which focused on suburban schools. Links between choice programs and inequity are reported in each country. Six Canadian articles and nine U.S. articles raised questions about equity of resources, specifically socioeconomic status. All Canadian authors and six U.S. authors discussed parental rationale for choosing programs. Both U.S. and Canadian authors suggested parental choice was based on race/class (Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Yoon & Gulson, 2010; Davies & Aurini, 2011; Makropoulos, 2009b), location (André-Bechely, 2007; Davies & Aurini, 2011), and achievement (Betebenner et al. 2005; Tedin & Weiher, 2004; Chapman & Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011; Yoon & Gulson, 2010). However, only Canadian authors identified a desire for community building as a rationale for school choice (Yoon & Gulson, 2010; Taylor & Mackay, 2008). Finally, while a larger proportion of Canadian authors discussed issues related to information for parents regarding choice programs, U.S. authors focused more on the complex and confusing admissions procedures of the programs (Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Rosenbloom, 2009; Taylor & Woollard, 2003; Bosetti, 2004; Davies & Aurini, 2011)

3.4 Gaps within the literature

As dominant themes surfaced throughout our analysis, so too did notable gaps in the literature we reviewed. We acknowledge, however, that the gaps in research identified below reflect our own presumptions, both as researchers and educators, of what we believed would be prevalent in the current literature regarding choice and its impact on equity. Furthermore, we recognize that while these particular topics were missing in the literature we reviewed, this could be a result of the search terms used and not because research in these areas does not exist.

The first notable absence in the literature was the lack of research regarding Aboriginal students and parents. The reviewed articles identifying issues of equity predominantly focused on underprivileged family groups such as those of low SES, African-American, and immigrants (Bifulco et al., 2009; Lubienski, Gulosino, & Weitzel, 2009; Rosenbloom, 2009; Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Tedin & Weiher 2004; Yoon & Gulson 2010). Considering the history of inequities related to Aboriginal children and schooling in North America, as well as the emergence of Aboriginal focused choice programs in some districts (Vancouver School Board, 2012), we were surprised that our searches resulted in only a single relevant article that included this topic (Taylor & Mackay, 2008).

Another group underrepresented in the literature was children with special learning needs or disabilities. As issues of equity have long been associated with special needs and disabilities regarding inclusion/exclusion (Howe & Welner, 2002), we expected more literature on this subject. Of all the literature reviewed, only Howe and Welner (2002) examined the exclusionary effects of choice on the inclusion policies within school districts.

Specifically within the Canadian literature reviewed, the lack of articles focusing on French immersion was also a surprise. Given both the long history of French immersion in Canada as well

as its popularity as a choice program in this country, our team expected to find more Canadian literature on this subject. However, of the relevant literature we analyzed, only Yoon and Gulson (2010) and Makropoulos (2009a, 2009b) discuss the impact of a French immersion program on equity. As stated above, this gap in the literature reviewed may be a result of the broader terms used in our search process. Indeed, we acknowledge that a more refined search focused on French immersion could possibly result in more research on this topic.

Another gap identified was the absence of literature focused directly on students' experiences with choice. While a significant body of research examined parent rationale by exploring the motives underlying parental choice, student rationale and the specific impact of choice on students were discussions notably absent from the research we analyzed. The only articles to address these issues with any detail were Rosenbloom (2009) in her investigation of "non-admits," a study comprised of interviews with students who are rejected from choice programs, and Makropoulos (2009a, 2009b) in her study of late French Immersion students and their rationales for choosing the program. Our research team found this missing student focus curious, as it is the students themselves who are presumably most affected by choice. Connected to the lack of student representation in the literature, was the lack of teacher perspective as well. None of the literature reviewed focussed on the perspectives of teachers, and only Gaskell (2002) included teacher voices in her study examining the development of an arts program. This final gap is significant since it is teachers who work most closely with students, and who are, or would be, the ones responsible for actually teaching the choice programs under debate. As such, teachers may be most able to identify learning needs and, thus, be able to influence the design of choice programs in such a way as to benefit underprivileged students.

3.5 Applying findings to a local context: Byng Arts Mini School

In this section, we applied our research findings to a choice program within the Vancouver Board of Education. Specifically, we examined the admissions process for Byng Arts Mini School (BAMS) to determine how, if at all, this particular choice program relates to any issues of equity found within the literature of this systematic review. For the purpose of this analysis, we analyzed the publically available admissions information provided by the program's website:

<http://byng.vsb.bc.ca/byngarts/>.

BAMS is a self-described “school-within-a-school” choice program that is designed for students with a “passion” for Fine Arts (Byng Arts Mini School, 2012). Located in an affluent Westside neighbourhood, this secondary school program (Grades 8 to 12) operates within the main school, Lord Byng Secondary, and is open to all students within the Vancouver school district. While students from Grades 8 to 11 are eligible to apply, the placement offers listed by grade indicate that the majority of applicants are Grade 7 students seeking entry into the program as a secondary school option. Placement is limited, and successful applicants are described as students who “direct their energy and passions towards the Fine Arts” and “who are also curious, self-motivated, and have demonstrated a record of strong academic achievement” (BAMS, 2012).

The first part of the admissions process we examined was the selection criteria required of all student applicants. Described on the website as “selection tools,” the list of requirements includes: a student's two most recent report cards and a District Placement Test score to “indicate your academic ability,” a hand-written essay to “indicate how well you will be able to cope with the enrichment”, an audition to “indicate your artistic ability”, and a statement of qualifications to “indicate your desire to be with Byng Arts and why” (BAMS, 2012). In addition to these criteria, applicants may also submit a sealed letter of reference (which cannot be from a classroom teacher

or principal), and students who are applying for the visual arts strand are required to submit three pieces of artwork.

Secondly, along with the above selection criteria, there are other required procedures a student applicant is responsible for during the admissions process. The application itself is in two parts -- a paper application and an online form, both of which must be completed and submitted. On top of this two-part registration, student applicants also need to register online for the District Placement Test, a test required for all students applying to Vancouver Mini School programs. For students who reside outside the Byng catchment area, a cross-boundary form must also be completed. The timeline provided by BAMS for this admissions procedure extends from October to March and includes key dates for events such as information nights, registration deadlines, placement tests, and auditions. Finally, it should also be noted that there is an additional \$85 fee to students who are accepted into the program -- a cost identified as covering “whole school activities” and “enrichment” (BAMS, 2012).

Upon applying our research findings to the BAMS admissions process, connections do emerge. Two dominant themes from the research, socioeconomic status and access, seem particularly relevant when applied to this local context. As stated in our findings, much of the literature linked these two themes. SES was identified as affecting families’ abilities to access choice, with families of higher SES being more likely to engage in choice programs (André-Bechely, 2007; Bosetti, 2004; Davies & Aurini, 2011; Henig & MacDonald, 2004; Rosenbloom, 2009; Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Taylor & Woollard, 2003). When these themes are applied to the BAMS admissions process as outlined above, related issues of equity concerning access arise. For example, both the exhaustive list of selection criteria and the array of application forms required by a student applicant are suggestive of the “complex” and “confusing” admissions

procedures identified by Schneider and Buckley (2002) and Rosenbloom (2009) as potential barriers for underprivileged families. Furthermore, the intense nature of these “selection tools,” such as placement testing, auditions, and portfolio samples, ties into the exacerbation of anxieties and the student need to draw upon social and cultural capital to engage in “market competition” (Taylor & Woollard, 2003). These findings appear to indicate that the BAMS admissions process is indeed more accessible for families of higher SES.

When the findings of this systematic literature review are applied to the local context of the BAMS admissions process, relationships relating to issues of equity become apparent. Indeed, concerns regarding SES and access arise that connect our research findings with the admissions process undertaken by students and their families. While the limited scope of this local context analysis certainly does not indicate an inherent connection between choice and issues of equity, the potential inequities within the BAMS admissions process are a concern for our research team and warrant further inquiry.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

This systematic literature review analyzed twenty-seven peer-reviewed articles from 2001-2011 in order to explore choice programs and related issues of equity within the context of public education. Among our key findings, dominant themes emerged from the literature that included: socioeconomic status as a significant factor in determining a family's engagement in choice; issues of access (both geospatial and information-based) as having an impact on a family's ability to choose; choice as a complex decision-making process whereby parent rationale for choosing is determined by a wide range of factors; and, that educational choice often results in a form of segregation or stratification.

The application of our findings to a local context indicates issues of equity exist within the admissions process of the Byng Arts Mini School program in the Vancouver school district. In particular, the complex admissions procedure and the extensive list of requirements expected of a student applicant raise equity concerns that reflect dominant themes within the literature such as SES and access.

Ultimately, what role should choice play within public education? Given the complexity of choice, this is a difficult question to answer and beyond the scope of this review. Certainly, there is evidence that issues of equity are linked with choice programs. Both educational leaders and policy makers, therefore, should be concerned with the inequities that arise or are magnified as a result of choice. Furthermore, if we are to understand what role choice should play within education, discussions must be expanded by moving beyond the limited scope of markets while acknowledging and addressing the issues of equity that clearly exist. As these discussions expand, a deeper understanding of the reasons behind choice may guide future choice policies toward more

equitable goals. For, if choice programs are designed to address the limitations and failures of regular schools by serving the needs of underprivileged groups (e.g. Aboriginal focused schools) rather than benefitting only those with cultural capital (e.g. Byng Arts), choice may yet play a valuable role in public education.

4.2 Recommendations

Recommendations for future research

As our findings indicated, there is a notable gap in student-focused and teacher-focused qualitative research. Much of the literature reviewed that did examine the impact of choice on students was quantitative in nature (i.e. academic achievement/test scores) with little focus on students' experiences or perspectives. Furthermore, the bulk of the research that explored the decision-making process and rationale behind choice was almost exclusively parent-focused. Indeed, only two studies interviewed students directly about their own experiences with educational choice, and only one article included input from teachers.

Consequently, a number of important questions arise, unaddressed in current literature, which would contribute to and expand the discussion surrounding choice programs and their impact on students. For example: Why do students choose a particular program? How involved are students in the decision-making process – are parents the ones who ultimately choose? What are the experiences of students (choosers, non-choosers, non-admits) as a result of educational choice? How does choice affect peer relationships and vice versa? Is the program design genuinely fulfilling a student need? What do teachers think of choice programs? The lack of qualitative research focused on students or teachers and their perspectives suggests that other influences, such as parents, policy makers, and perhaps market competition, play a dominant role in determining educational choice. We need further research that reflects students' and teachers' perspectives to

inform how and for whom choice programs are designed, as well as to determine how effective these programs are at enhancing students' learning experiences.

Recommendations for policy and practice

First, we acknowledge there are significant barriers to making choice equitable within the context of public education. Indeed, from our research it appears that inequities are deeply imbedded within choice, which is perhaps a reflection of the inequities in society itself. However, if choice programs are to be offered within public education, we believe they should be designed to minimize these inequities rather than magnify them. We also recognize that funding constraints in public education may significantly limit the capacity for equitable choice programs. Nevertheless we propose a number of recommendations for consideration and believe them to be applicable to a Canadian context:

- Choice needs to move from a neoliberal market model (parent/consumer driven) to a diversity model within an equity framework (student-need driven).
- Choice programs should be carefully designed to include children who, according to the literature reviewed, are currently underrepresented: for example, students of lower SES, racial/cultural minorities, second language learners, and students with identified learning needs and/or physical disabilities.
- The design of choice programs should be guided by teacher input and a combination of students' needs, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds.
- The geographic location of choice programs should be wide-ranging and distributed across various neighbourhoods within a district.
- If students are unable to access a program due to its location, transportation should be provided by school districts.

- Clear and easily accessible information should be available to parents of all communities in different languages and forms (digital, print, admissions counseling, information meetings).
- The steps in an admissions process for a choice program should be simplified and the number of admissions-related deadlines limited and flexible in nature.
- Selection requirements should be minimal and adaptable to allow students from a variety of backgrounds access to the program.
- Choice programs should not involve extra fees.
- In order to diversify choice programs, curriculum requirements should be more flexible to allow for greater variation in what is taught, reported, and evaluated.

While some of these recommendations may already exist within provincial and/or district policies, the issues raised by the literature suggest that inequities remain and, in many cases, are magnified by choice programs. Therefore, if choice is to play a role in public education, educational leaders must strive to ensure choice policies are equitable in both design *and* practice. We hope the above recommendations help expand the discussion surrounding educational choice, and provide some insight into how future research and design of choice programs can address issues of equity within public education.

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Appendix A

Figure 2.4: Coding assessment chart

Article Characteristics:

- Author(s): _____ Year: _____
- Title: _____
- Research Statement or Question:

- Article Findings:

- Tone of Article (Pro or against choice):

- Methodology: Conceptual Inquiry; Interview; Survey; Case Study;

Context:

- Canada
- Macro – national or provincial (state)
- Elementary
- Location: _____
- USA
- Micro – district or school
- Middle School
- Urban
- High School
- Rural

THEMES (Shopping List (SL) / ☆ In-depth (ID))

Choice

- Specific Choice Program
- Voucher
- Program in a Program
- Charter
- Private
- Intra-District
- Magnet

Equity

Outcome (learning achieved;
impacts on later life)

- Achievement
- Segregation
 - Race
 - Class
- Stratification
 - Skimming

Process (school experience/program
program content, access)

- Transportation
- Access to Information
- Parental Rationale
- Special Needs
- Diversity
- Democracy

Resource (taxes,
finances; supports)

- Funding
- SES

Notes: (Strengths and Limitations and...)

Appendix B

Table 2.5: Table of themes from the Canadian literature reviewed

Author (Year of Publication)			Bosetti (2004)	Davies & Aurini (2011)	Gaskell (2001)	Gaskell (2002)	Makropoulos (2009a)	Makropoulos (2009a)	Taylor & Mackay (2008)	Taylor & Woollard (2003)	Yoon & Gulson (2010)
Branch of Equity	Equity of RESOURCE (supports, finances, taxes)	Funding							★		
		SES	★	★			★			★	★
	Equity of PROCESS (school experience, program, content, access)	Geospatial Access		★							
		Access to Information	★	★						★	
		Parent Rationale	★	★			★	★	★		★
		Special Needs									
		Diversity	★		★	★			★	★	
		Democracy			★	★					
	Equity of OUTCOME (learning achieved; impacts on later life)	Achievement									
		Segregation (Race)								★	★
		Segregation (Class)									
		Stratification							★	★	★
Location	Country of Origin	Canada	★	★	★	★	★	★	★	★	★
		United States									
Tone	Article tone regarding the impact of choice on equity	Increases Equity			★	★					
		Leads to Inequity	★	★					★	★	★
		Neutral					★	★			

Appendix C

Table 2.6: Table of themes from the U.S. literature reviewed

[illegible]