Leaders' experiences in Arizona's mature education market

Amanda U. Potterton
University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, USA

Abstract

Purpose – In Arizona's mature, market-based school system, we know little about how school leaders make meaning of school choice policies and programs on the ground. Using ethnographic methods, the author asked: How do school leaders in one Arizona district public school and in its surrounding community, which includes a growing number of high-profile and "high-performing" Education Management Organisation (EMO) charter schools, make meaning of school choice policies and programs? The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – The author analysed 18 months of qualitative fieldnotes that the author collected during participant observations and six semi-structured school leader interviews from both traditional district public schools in the area ($n = 4$) and leaders from EMO charter schools ($n = 2$).

Findings – School leaders' decision-making processes were influenced by competitive pressures. However, perceptions of these pressures and leadership actions varied widely and were complicated by inclusive and exclusive social capital influences from stakeholders. District public school leaders felt pressure to package and sell schools in the marketplace, and charter leaders enjoyed the notion of markets and competition.

Practical implications – As market-based policies and practices become increasingly popular in the USA and internationally, a study that examines leaders' behaviours and actions in a long-standing school choice system is timely and relevant.

Originality/value – This study uniquely highlights school leaders' perceptions and actions in a deeply embedded education market, and provides data about strategies and behaviours as they occurred.

Keywords Educational leadership, Educational policy, Ethnographic methods, Charter schools, School choice, Education markets

Paper type Research paper

Since her appointment in 2017, President Donald Trump's Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, has advocated for expanding school choice (Klein, 2017). It is important to understand how school leaders and stakeholders are affected by and act in a school choice environment, especially as market-based policies and practices are becoming an increasingly prevalent and taken-for-granted part of institutional life in the USA (Klein, 2017). I situate this study in this educational policy environment, where school choice policies and programs are growing and as they emphasise various private provisions of public services (Harvey, 2005). I examine how school leaders at both district public schools and at Education Management Organisation (EMO) charter schools in an Arizona community made meaning of locally expanding school choice policies and programs.

Whilst popular media and research debates about school choice influence stakeholders' viewpoints at local, state, national and, in some places, international levels, they rarely consider how school leaders and other stakeholders actually negotiate this landscape in local settings, nor do they examine how communities are being shaped by them. Some debates surrounding school choice systems and, more specifically, charter schools – which are considered public schools but often co-exist with private groups – are often based in ideology or political partisanship rather than facts (Belfield and Levin, 2005; Reckhow *et al.*, 2015), thus avoiding how stakeholders are really being impacted. Therefore, discussing school choice policies without considering evidence related to intended and unintended local effects for students, families, teachers, school leaders, schools and communities risks neglecting important social equity and justice issues and further segregating and isolating some students and families as they make choices. School leaders, who carry major

school- and system-wide responsibilities and decision-making power, have experiences that can greatly help to inform our understanding of school choice in local settings.

Arizona has the second highest percentage of public school children enrolled in charter schools after Washington, DC. Approximately 550 charter schools operate in the state (Arizona Charter Schools Association, 2017). Arizona is also one of a few states that allows EMOs to be charter holders (Miron and Gulosino, 2013). For-profit EMOs, headed by politically influential chief educational officers, oversee a growing number of the state's public charter schools (Miron and Gulosino, 2013). The state of Arizona ranks second in the USA, behind Michigan, in the total number of for-profit EMOs (27) that operate charter schools (Miron and Gulosino, 2013). The state also ranks high in the USA, behind Texas and California, for the total number of nonprofit EMOs, of which there are 31 operating within the state's borders (Miron and Gulosino, 2013). Yet, in Arizona's mature, market-based schooling environment, we still know very little about how stakeholders make sense of school choice on the ground (Maranto *et al.*, 2015). This study includes secondary analyses of data from a larger ethnographic project, and I ask: How do school leaders in one Arizona district public school and in its surrounding community, which includes a growing number of high-profile and "high-performing" EMO charter schools, make meaning of school choice policies and programs?

Despite informative and continuing examinations of Arizona's school choice policies and programs by a small group of researchers (see Hess *et al.*, 2001; Milliman and Maranto, 2009; Milliman *et al.*, 2017), relatively few other scholars have deeply examined how Arizona's education market is changing schools in the state. Researchers have analysed academic achievement data in Arizona's charter sector, highlighting uneven results (see Chingos and West, 2015; Garcia *et al.*, 2009). Whilst these studies importantly increase our knowledge about Arizona's charter school achievement effects, Maranto *et al.* (2015) observed that, "[…] Arizona charter schools offer the closest American equivalent to a long term, state-wide public education market. Yet, few academics have studied Arizona charter schools, perhaps since the reality of school choice on the ground confounds those seeking easy answers" (p. 2). We must therefore undertake close examinations of interplaying social, cultural, political and economic aspects of school choice policies and programs. This study elaborates on the differences between how district public school leaders and EMO charter school leaders talked about and acted in the competitive market. Participant observation, fieldnotes, and interviews allowed me to capture school leaders' strategies and sensemaking as it was occurring.

School choice policies and practices
Social capital and school choice: bridging vs bonding capital
When faced with a wide variety of choices for schooling in a market-based system like Arizona, it is important to consider how stakeholders, including school leaders and parents, interact and affect one another by utilising the networks and affiliations with which they are a part. It is also important to think about how these interactions may be affecting public institutions like schools. In examining levels of social capital and the ways in which people identify, Putnam (2000) distinguished between "bridging" social capital, which involves allowing and encouraging access to external networks and is inclusive, and "bonding" social capital, which is inward and exclusive. Identities and groups, according to Putnam (2000), can be directed either way. These distinctions are important for both parents and school leaders, especially in a school choice system that promotes competition and market behaviour. In this environment, parents' choices and school leaders' perceptions and actions are indeed closely intertwined.

In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Putnam (2000) highlighted the importance of high levels of social connectedness, including community involvement for schools' success. Putnam connects the notion of schools as communities of

learning to the school choice reform approaches that were in earlier stages of development in the USA at the time of his writing. He stated:

> Indeed, two of the more controversial reform approaches – the creation of charter schools and the provision of publicly financed vouchers for kids to attend private schools – may be viewed as attempts by parents to give their kids the benefits of the "communal orientation" that produces exceptional student behavior and performance. Critics of choice programs fear they will only exacerbate existing educational inequities. Supporters argue that putting schooling into the invisible hand of the free market will improve quality for everyone because schools will be forced to compete on outcomes. While it is too soon to tell which side is right, we do have evidence that if "choice" programs work, their success may turn less on the magic of the marketplace than on the magic of social capital (p. 305).

If people's interpretations of schools as communities can be both inclusive and exclusive, as suggested by Putnam (2000), then it is important to discern the problems associated with practical choices and decisions about who is an insider and who is an outsider in schools (Cobb-Roberts *et al.*, 2006) and the way this affects school leaders' understanding and decisions.

Adding further to the difficulty of understanding school choice systems on the ground (Maranto *et al.*, 2015) is the increasing competitive pressures faced by schools, their leaders, parents and communities. In practice, stakeholders, through their individual choices, must navigate nuanced contexts and levels of capital as they engage with, imagine, and, perhaps, re-imagine notions of public schooling, charter schools, neighbourhood schools, communities and public spaces. Such choices, in an increasingly competitive educational environment, invariably result in tensions between public and private life and affect those who lead in schools.

Implications for school leaders and stakeholders on the ground
Complicated factors play a part in determining how school choice policies and practices affect and shape stakeholders' understanding and decisions. We know that school leaders are responding to market-based school systems and competitive pressures (Cucchiara, 2013a, b; Jabbar, 2015, 2016). We also know that families choose schools for a variety of complex reasons that do not always conform to market and competition theories (e.g. Buras, 2012, 2014; Chubb and Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1955; Potterton, 2018a, b; Yoon, 2016). These differences may create a disconnect and reveal social nuances between school leaders and families as they make choices. For example, market-based models for education have been met with pressures and resistance in some school-level settings. In New Orleans, Louisiana, after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, charter schools became the primary means for reconstructing the New Orleans schools and this created a competitive district (Jabbar, 2015). Local school leaders both noticed and responded to market-based reforms there after this reconstruction and felt pressure to increase branding and marketing to promote their schools (Jabbar, 2015, 2016). In another examination of New Orleans, Buras (2012, 2014) described the passion and defiance of one grassroots group that demanded the reopening of their traditional public school under a charter (since this was the only way they could reopen), thus becoming the only charter granted outside of any collaboration with management organisations. Here, stakeholders found a creative way to respond to New Orleans' new public school reforms. Not everyone agreed with the resistance to reforms, of course. Post-Katrina, Harris (2013) laid out a description of the city's public schools as they were before the hurricane and described the radical overhaul that occurred afterwards, suggesting that problems with corruption and dysfunction before the hurricane were so serious that, for New Orleans public schools, "there was nowhere to go but up" (p. 8). Some parents favoured the changes and supported what many saw as improved "political arrangements" (Burns and Thomas, 2015, p. 149) and a speeding up of already-occurring education reforms.

In other settings, class and social capital, even when resources cannot be effectively activated, impacted school choices and the school leaders who were making complicated decisions. Cucchiara (2013a) found that, in a Mid-Atlantic urban public school setting where middle-class families chose to send their children to a school that served mostly poor children, leaders strategically marketed to entice middle-class families into their urban public school. Cucchiara (2013a) further explained how, in the Midwest (see Edelberg and Kurland, 2009), middle-class families chose a school where there were more students coming from low-income homes: "[…] low-income and minority families […] are entirely silent […] They are portrayed either as satisfied beneficiaries of middle-class largesse or as parents who simply did not care where their children attended school" (p. 11). Cucchiara (2013b) also explained that leaders' efforts to entice middle-class families to attend schools where a larger number of children are poor will not solve educational inequities and concentrated poverty on its own. She shared how leaders, though, were encouraged to focus their energies on marketing and customer service:

> […] public and private funds supported staffers to serve as liaisons between Center City parents and the school district, often facilitating special access to district officials. Meanwhile, district leaders urged principals in the area to improve their customer service and changed the admissions policy for elementary school to provide Center City families with "enhanced school choice" (para. 5).

Above, middle-class families benefitted from utilising advantaged, middle-class resources whereas low-income and minority families were unfairly portrayed as satisfied or not caring about their children's schooling. This all necessarily affects school leaders' behaviour as they make many decisions[1]. Similarly, though perhaps more subtly, middle-class mothers in Atlanta, Georgia leveraged social capital in two gentrifying neighbourhoods and shared an agenda of equity but made school choices that did not reflect their equitable intentions (Roberts and Lakes, 2016). In Vancouver, Yoon (2016) explained how some schools are not a part of students' choice sets because of their geographic positioning as marginalised urban schools – occurrences that Yoon describes as "[…] dominant forms of stigmatization that shape local urban imaginaries of place" (p. 105). In all of these studies described, class and social capital affected school choice decisions, and these decisions, alongside increasing pressures for schools to compete, matter for school leaders.

On the other hand, Horvat (2012) documented a different and complicated picture of school choice processes and their associated conflicts by exposing a disconnect between school leaders and middle-class parents. At a northeastern US public school located in an urban neighbourhood, middle-class parents were "pushed away" when they attempted to integrate into the public school, either because they were dissatisfied with a lack of surety that their children would be enrolled due to capacity concerns or because they were faced with a rigid bureaucracy (Horvat, 2012). Horvat (2012) identified the frustrations that some parents faced when attempting to "effectively activate" (Lareau and Horvat, 1999, as cited in Horvat, 2012) their class resources for the benefit of their own children.

Overall, Putnam's (2000) explanations of "bridging" and "bonding" social capital can help us better understand how schools and their leaders can facilitate actions that can be inclusive, exclusive, and at times contradictory to their named intent. Therefore, we need more research that further observes and describes sensemaking and actions with rich data and through comparisons of leaders' positionality in school choice markets, where competition increasingly drives their decisions. This study contributes to the existing literature by closely analysing, comparing, and contrasting data from school leaders and their stakeholders, some who are a part of charter schools and some who are not.

Methodology

Ethnographic methods

I collected data for a larger ethnographic project during my time at one district public school (Southwest Learning Site, hereafter SLS) and in its surrounding community from 2014 to 2016. Similar to Ball and Gewirtz's (1997) justification that qualitative research can explore the nature and complexity of relationships and processes involved in education markets, my methods allowed me to gain an understanding about processes and complexities at SLS and in its surrounding community, all of which have been affected by increasing market-based education reforms. In Arizona, students can attend their neighbourhood-zoned schools but are under no obligation to do so. Importantly, although SLS is a public school, it was created and overseen by its district in 1990 to be a unique school of choice (not a charter school) that offers alternatives in teaching styles and approaches to learning. SLS closely reflected the original vision of charter schools that was proposed by Budde (1988) and Shanker (1988) who, in the late 1980s, spoke of alternative school settings that could help some students who were not succeeding in traditional school environments and where teachers could experiment with innovative methods for teaching. Although Budde and Shanker disagreed with what "charter schools" began to look like in practice, it was at this same time that SLS was created by the school district's Desert Public School System (DPSS) to do just what they had envisioned – that is, provide innovative and new educational opportunities for students who were not succeeding in their traditional public school setting.

Quantitatively, SLS had lower enrolment numbers (approximately 500) compared to most of the other elementary and middle schools in the area even though it served both elementary and middle school-aged children, whereas other schools in the district served students in years K-5 in elementary school and 6–8 in middle school (ADE, 2018). For these and other reasons, findings for this study are in many ways limited to the unique qualities that made and continued to drive SLS for many years in Arizona's DPSS. As with all qualitative research in localised settings, generalisations must be approached cautiously. That said, there is a space for naturalistic generalisations (Stake and Trumbull, 1982) to be made, whereupon individuals in other settings can make meaning, think about, and analyse their own contexts whilst reading about other contexts and comparing and contrasting experiences and settings. Further, qualitative research on school choice can provide useful lessons for research that examines the social, cultural and political mechanisms of education (Ball and Gewirtz, 1997).

Names of people and specific places have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. I define the school, including its employed teachers, staff, and administrators, and its surrounding community as students and parents with children attending the school as well as others who share deep commitments to the school and its community by maintaining active affiliations with it even after their formal connections to the school ended. This area also includes two high-profile EMOs' charter schools located nearby that are a part of two EMOs that I call Strong Establishment and Masters Group.

Data collection and analysis

My fieldwork took place over nearly two years in both formal and informal settings, including at the school, at parents' houses, at community-organising events, and in coffee shops and restaurants. I wrote fieldnotes and memos during 18 IRB-approved months of participant observation and immersion with stakeholders, including school leaders, teachers, parents, students, community and institution organisers, and other invested community members near SLS and in its surrounding community. This particular analysis focusses on my time spent with these stakeholders and relies heavily but not completely on interviews with school leaders at SLS and in other schools in the district, including the EMOs' charter schools. I collected qualitative data related to

the school leaders, including semi-structured interviews with them ($n = 6$). Overall, I conducted 37 interviews with 35 stakeholders, but the six interviews with school leaders are the main focus for this particular analysis whilst the others compliment these data. Leaders' interviews, which I recorded, took place at their schools of employment or in a coffee shop, and each lasted approximately two hours. To protect anonymity, I have not included in my analysis the specific roles of the interviewees. They are all school- or organisation-level administrators and all six are also parents with children at various schools in the area, including SLS and the EMO's charter schools. Eleanor, Marsha, Monica and Samuel are leaders at SLS or at nearby district public schools, and John and Matthew are EMO school leaders.

I created thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) from fieldnotes and memos throughout my time in the field, which helped in my analyses for this study. After producing verbatim transcripts (Maxwell, 2013) of the interviews, I performed multiple cycles of coding (Miles *et al.*, 2014) to form initial codes (not pre-developed) and, later, themes. I used tools including a codebook, reflexive writing in the form of jottings, and memos to develop the thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln and Guba, 1985), and organise the first- and second-cycle codes and themes (e.g. Creswell, 1998; Emerson *et al.*, 2011; Fetterman, 2010; Miles *et al.*, 2014). Examples of codes that were relevant for this study included "accountability", "political", "market behaviour", and "interaction and complexity of structure, culture, and agency". To validate findings, I referred to Miles *et al.*'s (2014) instructions about considering "truth value" (p. 312).

Particularly, I aimed to "come to a deep understanding" (Miles *et al.*, p. 313) through context-rich and meaningful descriptions, by triangulating data through member checking, researching websites of schools and the district, and speaking to people about specific topics in order to learn, for example, from multiple sources about the history of the school and changes that occurred over time. As examples, I spoke with participants to confirm whether I represented their voice accurately by sharing write-ups. In one instance, I attended a district school and community meeting to hear from district administrators and attending parents about how the budget would be prioritised in coming months, which confirmed some of the cost concerns and shortfalls that were expressed by many stakeholders.

Study site context

Arizona's intra- and inter-district open enrolment policies have created a situation wherein students and families may choose schools and take part in public activities both inside and/or outside of the school districts and physical neighbourhoods in which they live. The policies have created open flows of students into and out of adjacent districts (Powers *et al.*, forthcoming), and a significant number of students from other districts attend SLS or nearby charter schools. As a result, Arizona's open enrolment policies blur neighbourhood boundaries that used to be delineated by school attendance boundaries.

When I was conducting fieldwork, SLS had also recently experienced an increased entrance of low-income families, and the school was relatively newly designated as a Title 1 school. Its test scores and performance ranking had declined over the past few years. Concurrently, the two high-profile and "high-performing" EMOs (Strong Establishment and Masters Group), opened charter schools near the school. These charter schools, known for their nationally competitive academic rankings, were both situated close to the school and surrounding community. They could cap enrolment and served a demographic that underserved students from minority groups, students who were English language learners, and students with individualised education plans. Especially for one of the EMO's charter schools, although they did not have admission requirements, their curricular structure was highly accelerated and was attractive to students who could excel in this type of environment.

Recent changes at SLS
As I came to meet more people at SLS and in the school's surrounding area via participant observation and snowball sampling, the school went through a period of increasingly difficult changes that continue to, up to the point of this writing, challenge its existing culture and alternative teaching and learning models that focussed on Montessori-style approaches. At the same time, the district leaders' focus honed in on the school's performance, including its period of lower test scores, whilst the Arizona legislature was and is continuing to consider more bills that further expand school choice policies and programs. Through it all, I saw how individuals who cared greatly for Arizona's public school system could diverge in their actions when it came to making decisions – for parents, about their own children's immediate well-being and, for teachers and school leaders, in terms of their positions as public-service professionals.

All six of the school leaders I interviewed were also parents who had children enrolled somewhere within the district public or charter school system. As a mother, I empathised with many of the hard and emotional conversations that some of these and other parents shared with me, as they struggled to make choices in a seemingly competitive and incentivist public school system (Lubienski *et al.*, 2011) that encouraged the schools to compete for resources against one another. The district school leaders were in some ways compelled to take part in this business-like system that they did not necessarily like, especially because the public schools were already struggling financially. Funding followed students to their school of attendance, and teachers and school leaders talked about how these policies played a noted role in their professional responsibilities and how pressures to perform and maintain enrolment affected their priorities.

The findings below describe how school system leaders at SLS, in nearby district public schools, and at EMOs viewed choice. Some of the leaders were SLS insiders, either as principals or assistant principals, and also as parents. Others, at the EMOs, were not SLS insiders. Their connection with SLS, though, related to its close proximity to SLS and their understanding of the school in relation to their own.

Findings
Bridging capital and changing priorities
SLS leaders, at some points in the school's history, actively sought out opportunities to create a "bridge" for people with different types of social, cultural, and economic capital to come together. One evening, shortly after I had started spending time with stakeholders at SLS, I talked informally with the passionate principal who was preparing to leave for a position in another state, and he shared that a goal for the leaders at SLS was to increase diversity. They succeeded, in part, by intentionally providing a bus service for students who lived outside of the neighbourhood who could otherwise not attend. Some parents loved the fact that the school was intentionally more diverse than other area district public schools. Others, and although they shared this next part less directly and enthusiastically, were increasingly concerned about how some changes in demographics, such as rising numbers of students who were English language learners and students who were living in poverty, were in tension with the existing "culture" of learning and teaching. Academic needs and resource requirements were changing. This critically challenged some existing practices at the school and some parents' and teachers' positions about supporting diversity and equity within the school, which became increasingly noticeable to me during my time in the field.

Some parents liked that they had the opportunity to participate in shared decision-making at SLS, which had always been an important aspect of SLS's organisational structure. Yet, as pressures to provide different resources for a more diverse population and to maintain enrolment grew out of concerns related to losing students (and funding) to

nearby school "competitors", teachers, school leaders, and parents sometimes found themselves in conflict about what was best for the school. Regarding pressure to attract and keep families, one area school leader said, "Let's say [a parent gets] open enrolled into a school. The mentality is, 'We can raise noise […] because you serve us'. And um, you serve the parents as opposed to the students". Other stakeholders expressed similar views.

An ongoing fragile working consensus about the vision and priorities for SLS as a school "community" became increasingly challenged as pressures to compete increased, and there were numerous principal turnovers. The principal had not been at the school for long, and a new principal was already hired by the district to begin the following fall during my time there. When I started conducting fieldwork at SLS, one principal was leaving. When I finished fieldwork at the school, yet another new principal would soon be arriving. One mother, who was also an administrator (not at SLS), talked about the performance pressures that the district and the SLS community faced, and how she predicted that the future of SLS could change as more focus was placed on competing with other schools based on standardised testing:

> The new principal is going to come in [to SLS] and, because the mission statement isn't very clear and the school site plan isn't well defined, the principal's going to do that and then, to prevent further conflict, they're probably going to take it in a direction that's more academic. I'm just betting that. And for many years, 18 years, SLS was very fortunate to have a community and teachers that were very much of like mind and administration. And they were on a little island unto themselves, a utopia with their little garden and everything, really in every way. And then people came knocking at their door and kind of penetrated that little idyllic[…][I ask for clarification about who the people are][…] Well, test scores, competitors, charter schools, the school district, administration, the superintendent saying, "You need to figure this out." And also the State Department, with the posting of these grades and these giant letters that are attached to the fronts of schools, that's what I mean. That kept raining down on them and, really, what utopia can really take all that constant bombardment?

This mother and school leader predicted that performance pressures that were building were making schools and leaders accountable in different ways than they had ever experienced before, even though they were not serving the same groups of students as those at the nationally high-ranking charter schools against whom they were increasingly compared.

As an illustration, Grace, a long-time and dedicated teacher at SLS, struggled to understand the full purpose of general standardised testing procedures and performance-based teacher evaluation systems. Grace was a knowledgeable, gently spoken, and well-respected teacher at the school, and she talked with me about her confusion and the apparent contradictions in the testing models vs the school's longer-standing teaching and learning models. "Performance" models were increasingly important as measures for judging both her students' and her own performance at the school and district level, and she seemed bewildered when she said:

> So I look at those numbers and I'm like, "That makes no sense to me!" And then I look at what my kids' scores were and I said, "Now it really makes no sense because I just tested 64 sixth graders and the average growth across my 64 was 178 points and they were supposed to grow 38." So, I'm a rock star and I'm frustrated because I don't think they're doing what they should be, so where does this number even come from […] but what does it really mean?

Further, with this growing tension about the school's vision, priorities, and increasing focus on tests, some parents decided to leave the school. This created a particularly fragile environment for the school leaders and staff, who had earlier intentionally reached out to communities with specialised needs and who, in the present, faced immediate district-level pressures to maintain competitive enrolment numbers.

Packaging and selling schools in the "public" marketplace
One district school leader told me about a language immersion teaching programme that was being distributed by the district to some schools to keep up with what they felt was a demand in the area. Some of the new, "competing" charter schools offered in-depth foreign language programs and, as district leaders were aware of this, they worked to repackage or "sell" their schools in new ways. Understandably, such changes at school sites, despite being attractive to many parents, also negatively influenced others' views on what was happening in schools.

For the most part, leaders at district public schools had viewpoints related to markets and accountability that were in contrast to the viewpoints of EMO leaders. In comparing these viewpoints, there were some striking differences. For example, the district public school leaders expressed how they needed to understand, adapt to, and manage their schools with a marketing perspective always in mind. One district public school leader talked about a perceived general awareness in the area that education was being treated like a commodity, and he felt that the district public schools were trying to keep up with what was "trendy":

> We're very aware of charter schools, we school personnel in the district because you have, um[…] it is so competitive. People are so trendy in finding the next coolest thing, that's being getting talked about on the soccer field and baseball field, what is like the next greatest thing that's gonna help their son or daughter become a doctor. Um, so, yeah, I mean, it's just more of a commodity in this area.

Another district public school leader was concerned with declining enrolment in schools across the district, which could result in school closures, and she worked hard to prepare materials that showed parents during tours that, in many cases, the "competing" charter schools were not always performing better on tests than the students at the district public school:

> […] [the superintendent] admonished us to think of ways to increase our enrolment, and worried that some schools who were in declining enrolment in future years would have the possibility of closing if they didn't maintain higher numbers. So we took that seriously, because we were in a declining enrolment situation, one because of new charter schools in the area, and also, in the [district], it's a time of declining enrolment as there's no baby boom.

Indeed, my analysis of total enrolment numbers in the DPSS from the years 2011 to 2016 identified a 7.5 per cent decrease in students enrolled, and the latest data also show continued decline (ADE, 2018). SLS also had a slight decline in enrolment over the same years, although it was smaller than the districts' overall decrease (ADE, 2018).

Alternatively, one EMO leader was not concerned about the potential for declining enrolment at the charter schools. Rather, he felt confident that the EMO had "gotten to the point" of nearly saturating its schools in the metropolitan area:

> I don't think of us as competitors with the district or anything like that (Pause). I think we've gotten to the point where we've opened almost all the schools in the [metropolitan] area that we will open so[…] (pause)[…] when it comes to recruiting students I don't think of it in a competitive way.

Whilst district public schools were required to provide placements for all students in a catchment area, and one district school leader noted that there was declining enrolment in the district in part because there was not a baby boom, the charter schools did not need to deal with this consideration. Interestingly, one EMO leader did not even consider recruiting to be an act of competition. Moreover, the charter school organisations could, upon reaching their EMO-decided saturation goals for enrolment, extend their profile by growing their schools elsewhere in the country and even beyond the USA if they so desired.

School choice and competitive edges

Whereas one district public school leader talked about the need to work to dispel the myth that the charter schools in the area always performed better than the district public schools, another district public school leader talked about the overall challenge for any schools to keep up with EMOs that were, as noted above, "trendy" and attractive. Two EMO leaders' quotations revealed much different perceptions. They were, either, not thinking about the district public schools much at all, since their competition was at the "national" level (for example, one EMO leader said, "What I do want, and what I always want, is I want to be a top-ranked school […]") or they had such a strong negative opinion of the public schools in the area that there was a disregard for how they might be experiencing their presence in the district. As one EMO leader confidently exclaimed, "The suburban schools are bad […] it looks nice, they have really good facilities, but the instruction's S**T!" It is important to consider how the EMO leaders' opinions were voiced from a "winning" position and had a competitive "edge" in the market according to popular accountability measures even as, upon looking closer, the schools served a more advantaged population of students.

An EMO leader alluded to this recognition that they served an advantaged population of students by considering the attractiveness of opening schools in suburban neighbourhoods. He explained how it was helpful for EMOs to open where parents have a lot of financial resources and other capital to support the organisation and, as one direct effect of gaining these resources, the EMOs could help to create a widespread "cultural renewal", or save public education by subsequently opening schools in lower-income neighbourhoods at a later time. An EMO leader compared such a model's potential for success to a venture capitalist's focus on Return on Investment. Confident of the EMO's potential for Arizona and beyond, he believed that, if policymakers could think about education in this way that mimics venture capitalism, there could, indeed, be "revolutionary", mission-oriented results. The EMO leader said:

> We need to make these investments, but in a savvy way. Like a person really truly in a marketplace would do […] It's all part of this season of trying to prove something to the policymakers, prove something to the marketplace, to do that in [inner-city neighborhoods] you have to get certain scale in the suburbs and so you go out and you get that scale. Why? Because you also want to be in the inner city. You want to be in every nook and cranny.

A district public school leader's comment reaffirms how this perspective dominates the school choice market in Arizona. From his perspective, smaller-scale attempts to provide and sustain "niche" one-site mom-and-pop charter schools, or even district public schools of choice like SLS, would likely not work in a place where financially, politically powerful and "prestigious" EMOs can dominate the market:

> District public school leader: Charter schools have to up their game in a place [like] we live in this area[…].
>
> [Author]: So you feel like it is specific to where you're at?
>
> District public school leader: […] I feel it is. But I can't imagine [any new and one-site charter] school coming onto a market, you know. Like, "I cannot only compete against the public schools, but I can't compete against the other quote-unquote 'prestigious' charter schools, like [an EMO] and [an EMO], and be in that market myself as a mom-and-pop type of charter school or as a one school charter school." I think it would be very challenging in this area. Because people are very, I mean, they are market driven in this area, and when I say this area, I don't know how large that area is. I don't know if that means just my neighbourhood around here, but I don't think that I'm completely being too general in saying that. I would be quasi-confident saying that that would be a pretty good statement for all of the [district] area.

The district public school leader saw and described first-hand the difficulties of a school choice system where EMO leaders have large amounts of capital, resources, and power, and

can therefore say, as one EMO leader did, "We run small schools but we want to run them at massive scale".

To provide an alternative perspective, John, an EMO leader, sincerely expressed his concerns with local and wider misconceptions about the Arizona EMO charter schools of which he was a part. We spoke of the challenges the organisation faced in dispelling what he viewed were myths, and he genuinely cared about education and providing students with opportunities to reach for their utmost potential. John said, referring to the criticism that the schools are subtly selective upon entry and also push students out:

[…] we can't be selective really! I mean, when we were one school in [Arizona city], or one school in [different Arizona city] and one school in [different Arizona city] and one school in [different Arizona city], I could survive by serving a niche group of individuals. But we are so big now that there aren't that many people in that niche group. So, I mean, we've really, just by virtue of our expansion, become the thing that I think we always were, which is, we're a place for any kid who is willing to work hard. And you don't have to be a math and science […] uh, you don't have to be able to do calculus in third grade. I mean, but you do have to be willing to work hard, and the family has to be willing to support that. And, um, we are finding kids willing to work hard, so it's been fun to be active in dispelling a bit of dirt, not dirt, but opinions that are contrary.

John's comment, though, about the schools being an open place for anyone "who is willing to work hard" misses the imperative, critical point that the schools appeal to parents who have the financial ability to provide for and support their children in ways that are required for access to and success in the EMO's charter schools, such as through transportation and tutoring costs, if required. Therefore, many, but not all, parents in this group of which he speaks also likely had a competitive edge or, in other words, potential to activate social capital resources for class advantages to benefit their own children.

Discussion and implications
SLS leaders' seeking of opportunities for students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds to join the school, by providing bus services to support this endeavour, revealed tensions from parents and other stakeholders who became concerned about both the population and "behaviours" at the school as well as the overall value in the neighbourhood. This action did, as described, result in shifting demographics within the school and was an intentional act to promote some values of the school that encouraged diversity and inclusion. Further, this was what Putnam (2000) describes as an attempt at bridging capital. This also proved, however, to become a source of real tension as parents consciously or unconsciously attempted to weigh their concerns against the opportunity to provide a more economically diverse schooling opportunity for their child. This suggests that the line between who is an insider and who is an outsider may be subtle yet present, an intentional or unintentional resistance of bridging capital, and an expression of bonding capital (Putnam, 2000) that inevitably promotes exclusion as stakeholders negotiate this new social landscape. Indeed, similar to how Yoon (2016) revealed that some student participants' choice sets in Vancouver excluded schools based on their marginalised school contexts, numerous parents with whom I spoke never considered SLS because they had heard that SLS was meant for children who had trouble at other schools. SLS community members and leaders spoke of needing to dispel this impression of the school.

Holme (2002) demonstrated how commodified education markets reveal a contradiction when parents take part in schooling as a private rather than public good. Further, as Olson Beal and Hendry (2012) noted, "Conceptualizing public education as a private rather than a public good advances an understanding of democracy as a consumer commodity. Democracy itself, not just schools, is being reformed" (p. 544). I found, though, that even where this contradiction was evident in this community amongst the leaders in their various

schools, many leaders and parents nevertheless consciously recognised and were critical of competitive tendencies in the education market. Parents' conversations commonly brought up the roles of school leaders at SLS and in the charter school, and they spoke about their tours, appeals for donations and marketing campaigns at particular schools. Indeed, Jabbar's (2015, 2016) research identified the strategies that leaders took in thinking about students as money in New Orleans. At SLS and in its surrounding community, the school leaders and other stakeholders certainly felt this effect, as well, noting the way competition might push out one-site mom-and-pop charter schools.

At the same time, leaders were dealing with sometimes exhausting pressures to maintain enrolment and to increase their attractiveness as a school. Also concurrently, high-profile EMOs increased the presence of their charter schools in the area and created a "niche" market for some academically high-achieving students. And significantly, in Arizona, where complete intra- and inter-district open enrolment policies and practices are in effect, leaders' decision-making processes, including those of principals, assistant principals, superintendents, and EMO leaders, certainly aided in forming local school perceptions, since these leaders all helped to guide the culture and direction of schools in a major way. All of this directly influenced how community members made sense of schooling options, and if and why they might consider any one particular district public or charter school as an option.

All school leaders packaged and had an expectation to "sell" their schools to potential parents. Indeed, Monica, a district public school leader, reflected upon the importance of prospective student and family tours that were similar to other conversations that I had. Numerous stakeholders said, upon the experience of taking part in school choice, that the expectation is not unlike selling education (or buying) as a sales person might sell (or a buyer might purchase) a car. Finally, competitive edges were exposed in the district. District school leaders were always under pressure to maintain enrolment, unlike EMO leaders who were enthusiastic about competition (although they did not think they were competing locally). They had the opportunity to gain a "niche" advantage in a market and then pull out of the area to expand elsewhere.

After describing these complexities in their local context, I now return full circle to popular perspectives in debates and discussions about the potential benefits and pitfalls of charter schools' increasing market-like policy presence throughout Arizona, the USA and beyond. The political contexts of education reform were often, but not always, influential for school leaders, teachers and parents. In conversations with stakeholders, issues related to market accountability and the fact that school choice policies were a priority not only at local and state levels, but increasingly at national and international levels of politics, were brought up many times. Beyond the market rhetoric, though, stakeholders were also deeply concerned with what was happening inside of schools and, in some cases, this mattered a lot more than anything else.

Findings address a largely unexplored gap in current knowledge by analysing both district public and charter school leaders' understanding of and experiences with market-based school choice policies, and how their actions may influence schooling, the discourse of public schooling, and changing perceptions about neighbourhood public schooling in Arizona for parents, students, and other community stakeholders. Those with a competitive advantage and generous levels of social capital were able to "bond" in ways that demonstrate the need to further study this phenomenon alongside potential intended and unintended consequences in local markets.

There are further questions that emerge from this study. As examples, can Arizona's long-standing market-based policies and practices serve as a point of reference for other states' school leaders as their school choice policies and practices grow? Considering that Arizona's policies and programs have existed for over 25 years, how might the findings in

this study speak to (though not generalise about) commonly held assumptions regarding notions of neighbourhood and community schools in the USA and around the globe? What will happen for school leaders and stakeholders in states like Kentucky, where the school choice movement is in its infancy? These are areas that require close observation and rich contextual data. As market-based policies and practices become increasingly popular in the USA and internationally, a study that attempts to understand how leaders respond to competitive expectations related to school choice policies is timely and relevant.

One district school leader summed up multiple stakeholders' thoughts about how a district public school could be sustainable in a high-stakes and long-standing school choice environment like theirs: "You have to either mould with what's happening or you sink". This realisation certainly has implications for leaders in Arizona's changing policy landscape of public education, is relevant for wider leadership and policy conversations about school choice, and also points to a particular fragility in public institutions that can and should be further examined.

Note

1. These illustrations show the ways in which schools can be framed by stakeholders and how school leaders take part in marketing. For research that explains the ways in which "advertising" is becoming an ever more apparent part of school leaders' roles, see DiMartino and Jessen (2018)

References

ADE (2018), "Accountability and research", available at: www.azed.gov/accountability-research/a-f-resources/ (accessed 1 August 2018).

Arizona Charter Schools Association (2017), "About charter schools", available at: https://azcharters.org/about-charter-schools/ (accessed 23 August 2018).

Ball, S.J. and Gewirtz, S. (1997), "Is research possible? A rejoinder to tooley's 'on school choice and social class'", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 18 No. 4, pp. 575-586.

Belfield, C.R. and Levin, H.M. (2005), *Privatizing Educational Choice: Consequences for Parents, Schools, and Public Policy*, Routledge, New York, NY.

Budde, R. (1988), *Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts*, Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands, Andover, MA.

Buras, K.L. (2012), "'It's all about the dollars': charter schools, educational policy, and the racial market in New Orleans", in Watkins, W.H. (Ed.), *The Assault on Public Education: Confronting the Politics of Corporate School Reform*, Teachers College Press, New York, NY, pp. 160-188.

Buras, K.L. (2014), *Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space: Where the Market Meets Grassroots Resistance*, Routledge, New York, NY.

Burns, P.F. and Thomas, M.O. (2015), *Reforming New Orleans: The Contentious Politics of Change in the Big Easy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, NY.

Chingos, M.M. and West, M.R. (2015), "The uneven performance of Arizona's charter schools", *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Vol. 37 No. 1S, pp. 120S-134S.

Chubb, J.E. and Moe, T.M. (1990), *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC.

Cobb-Roberts, D., Dorn, S. and Shircliffe, B.J. (Eds) (2006), *Schools as Imagined Communities: The Creation of Identity, Meaning, and Conflict in US History*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY.

Creswell, J. (1998), *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Cucchiara, M.B. (2013a), *Marketing Schools, Marketing Cities: Who Wins and Who Loses When Schools Become Urban Amenities*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Cucchiara, M.B. (2013b), "Cities are trying to fix their schools by luring the middle class: it won't work", *The Atlantic*, available at: www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/10/cities-are-trying-to-fix-their-schools-by-luring-the-middle-class-it-wont-work/280390/ (accessed 8 June 2018).

DiMartino, C. and Jessen, S.B. (2018), *Selling School: The Marketing of Public Education*, Teachers College Press, New York, NY.

Edelberg, J. and Kurland, S. (2009), *How to Walk to School: Blueprint for a Neighbourhood School Renaissance*, Rowman & Littlefield, Plymouth.

Emerson, R.M., Fretz, R.I. and Shaw, L.L. (2011), *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 2nd ed., The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Fetterman, D.M. (2010), *Ethnography: Step-By-Step*, 3rd ed., Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Friedman, M. (1955), "The role of government in education", in Solo, R.A. (Ed.), *Economics and the Public Interest*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, pp. 123-144.

Garcia, D., Barber, R. and Molnar, A. (2009), "Profiting from public education: education management organizations and student achievement", *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 111 No. 5, pp. 1352-1379.

Geertz, C. (1973), *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York, NY.

Harris, D. (2013), *The Post-Katrina New Orleans School Reforms: Implications for National School Reform and the Role of Government. Lecture Conducted at the University of Michigan*, Lecture is Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, Ann Arbor, MI, available at: https://educationresearchalliancenola.org/files/publications/UM-Speech-on-New-Orleans3.pdf

Harvey, D. (2005), *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Hess, F., Maranto, R. and Milliman, S. (2001), "Small districts in big trouble: how four Arizona school systems responded to charter competition", *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 103 No. 6, pp. 1102-1124.

Holme, J.J. (2002), "Buying homes, buying schools: school choice and the social construction of school quality", *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 72 No. 2, pp. 177-205.

Horvat, E.M.N. (2012), "Pushing parents away: the role of district bureaucracy in an urban school", in Richter, M. and Andresen, A. (Eds), *The Politicization of Parenthood: Shifting Private and Public Responsibilities in Education and Child Rearing*, Springer, New York, NY, pp. 197-212.

Jabbar, H. (2015), "'Every kid is money': market-like competition and school leader strategies in New Orleans", *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Vol. 37 No. 4, pp. 638-659.

Jabbar, H. (2016), "Between structure and agency: contextualizing school leaders' strategic responses to market pressures", *American Journal of Education*, Vol. 122 No. 3, pp. 399-431.

Klein, A. (2017), "Trump budget would make massive cuts to Ed. Dept., but boost school choice", Education Week's Blogs, 16 March.

Lincoln, Y. and Guba, E. (1985), *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Lubienski, C., Scott, J. and DeBray, E. (2011), "The rise of intermediary organizations in knowledge production, advocacy, and educational policy", *Teachers College Record*.

Maranto, R., Laczko-Kerr, I. and Vasile, A. (2015), "Desert bloom? Lessons from two decades of Arizona charter schooling", paper presented to the 2015 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL, 16-20 April.

Maxwell, J.A. (2013), *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*, Sage, Los Angeles, CA.

Miles, M.B., Huberman, M.A. and Saldaña, J. (2014), *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, Sage Publications, Los Angeles, CA.

Milliman, S. and Maranto, R. (2009), "Educational renegades: dissatisfied teachers as drivers of charter school formation", *Journal of School Choice*, Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 138-162.

Milliman, S., Maranto, R. and Wood, W.C. (2017), "Warding off competition: the impact of school district outreach on charter expansion in Arizona", *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 98 No. 5, pp. 1328-1338.

Miron, G. and Gulosino, C. (2013), *Profiles of for-Profit and Nonprofit Education Management Organizations: Fourteenth Edition – 2011-2012*, National Education Policy Center, Boulder, CO.

Olson Beal, H. and Hendry, P.M. (2012), "The ironies of school choice: empowering parents and reconceptualizing public education", *American Journal of Education*, Vol. 118 No. 4, pp. 521-550.

Potterton, A.U. (2018a), "Different choices: a public school community's responses to school choice reforms", *The Qualitative Report*, Vol. 23 No. 8, pp. 1908-1931.

Potterton, A.U. (2018b), "Market pressure and Arizona public school leaders: 'that package is like a brand new Cadillac!'", *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership*, Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 284-309, available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.30828/real/2018.2.7

Powers, J.M., Topper, A.M. and Potterton, A.U. (forthcoming), "Interdistrict mobility and charter schools in Arizona: understanding the dynamics of public school choice", *Journal of Public Management & Social Policy*, Vol. 25 No. 3, pp. 56-87.

Putnam, R.D. (2000), *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY.

Reckhow, S., Grossmann, M. and Evans, B.C. (2015), "Policy cues and ideology in attitudes toward charter schools", *Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 43 No. 2, pp. 207-227.

Roberts, A. and Lakes, R.D. (2016), "Middle-class mothers on urban school selection in gentrifying areas", *Education and Urban Society*, Vol. 49 No. 3, pp. 203-220.

Shanker, A. (1988), *Untitled Speech to the National Press Club*, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Washington, DC, available at: https://reuther.wayne.edu/files/64.43.pdf

Stake, R.E. and Trumbull, D.J. (1982), "Naturalistic generalizations", *Review Journal of Philosophy and Social Science*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 1-12.

Yoon, E. (2016), "Young people's cartographies of school choice: the urban imaginary and moral panic", *Children's Geographies*, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 101-114.

About the author

Amanda U. Potterton is Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership Studies at the University of Kentucky. Amanda's current research agenda focusses on how public school stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, school leaders, and other community members, interpret and experience school choice policies and practices in local settings. Prior to pursuing her PhD Degree, she was a New York City Teaching Fellow and taught special education in New York City, and Teacher and school leader in the UK. Amanda holds PhD Degree in Educational Policy and Evaluation from the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. Amanda U. Potterton can be contacted at: amanda.potterton@uky.edu