# A Critical Narrative Study of Latinx Parents' Experiences Navigating Georgia's Tax Credit Scholarship Program

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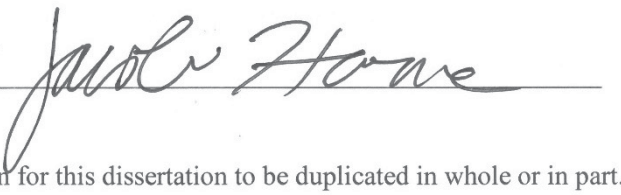
Signature 

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ABSTRACT

Providing school choice as a means of competition in education is a neoliberal goal that has gained momentum over the latter half of the twentieth century. In 2008, the State of Georgia enacted legislation for a new tax credit called the Qualified Education Tax Credit (QETC), which provides scholarship funds for students to move from their districted public school to a private school of their choice. Research has been conducted on how members of the dominant group and some members of non-dominant groups have navigated school choice. One group of people whose experiences have not been heard yet is the Latinx community. Using purposeful sampling, this critical narrative study explores the experiences of Latinx parents in Georgia as they navigate moving their child(ren) from their districted public school to the private school of their choice. To better understand the system which these families are navigating, market theory, rational choice theory (RCT), and Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit) were employed. Guided by Seidman's (2013) methods for personal interviews, the experiences of this marginalized community will finally be given a platform. Using Saldaña's (2016) coding methods to identify themes, the findings of this study indicate that Latinx parents are seeking a better academic environment and, in this case, a religious education. The findings also demonstrate that Latinx families continue to face barriers to their existence, in this case as they navigate the school choice marketplace created in Georgia. Nevertheless, once in their chosen private school, these Latinx parents are satisfied with their (or in some cases, their child's) decision and feel as though they have been welcomed into this new community.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I would like to thank my colleague, Peter Newman. Without your assistance, several of these participants' stories would never have seen the light of day. Just as you have professionally, you remained my right hand working as an interpreter, a translator, and a wordsmith. You are one of the finest educators that I have ever worked with. You are also one of the most respectable men that I have ever known.

I would like to thank the participants. Without you, this dissertation would not have been possible. Your devotion to your family is awe-inspiring. We would be a much greater society were we all to sacrifice the way that you have for your family. I will never forget your stories, and I am honored to have shared them with the world. My prayers are with you all as you and your child(ren) continue your journey.

Lastly, I would like to thank two very important women in my life, my wife, Brittani Horne, and my mother, Tracey Silliman. Your encouragement and support enabled me to achieve this piece of work. Brittani, without your willingness to take on so much on the home front, I could have never completed this journey. My journey has been your journey, and this dissertation will always have been a shared work. Mom, you have always been a rock throughout my life. I have sat by and idly watched you overcome and achieve so much in your life. I look forward to spending more quality time with both of you.

# DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my two sons, Noah and Jonah. I have invested so much of who I am in you. You must know that you can accomplish anything you set your mind to in this world. In this piece of work, I hope that you see the incredible journeys these families have traversed seeking opportunities that may often be taken for granted or not realized. I hope that you always see yourself in your fellow person and work toward helping the USA live up to its ideals.

# Chapter I

## INTRODUCTION

Theologian, Richard Shuall, in his foreword to the first English translation of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, stated, "There is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process" (2018, p. 219). Educating a nation's citizenry is arguably one of the most critical functions of government. Yet, the process by which a government educates its citizenry, the curriculum inculcated in the youth, and the funds devoted indicate a government's educational and political philosophies. Based upon neoliberal underpinnings, a sizeable aspect of educational reform in the United States has been devoted to providing American families more educational options in addition to their districted ("zoned") public school. The *process* (emphasis added) available for families to navigate, as they seek the best educational options for their children, is not neutral. Research has demonstrated that school choice is rife with greater-societal issues such as race (Simms & Talbert, 2019), socioeconomics (Rowe & Lubieski, 2017), and geography (Bell, 2007; Taylor Haynes, Phillips, & Goldring, 2010).

In his first joint address on February 28, 2017, President Trump highlighted Denisha Merriweather, a young Black woman from Florida (Strauss, 2017). According to the President, thanks to a tax-credit scholarship, Denisha moved from her districted public school to a private school. This move saved Denisha from a trajectory of becoming another member of her family not to earn a high school diploma to a soon-to-be postgraduate student (Strauss, 2017). Using Florida's school choice program as an

exemplar, President Trump called on Congress to "pass an education bill that funds school choice for disadvantaged youth, including millions of African-American [*sic*] and *Latino children* [emphasis added]" (White House, 2017, para 59). President Trump's argument for national school choice legislation as a tool to assist minorities in escaping the perils of the public schooling system is not new. By the latter part of the 20th century, parental school choice, as an educational policy, began to be promoted as a tool to continue along the path of *Brown v. Board of Education's* (1963) assertion of educational equality (Carl, 2011; Garcia, 2018; Gooden, Jabbar, & Torres, 2016). The question remains, in a societal institution not created with people of color in mind, if Denisha Merriweather's story is a commonality or an anomaly for the experiences of the members of non-dominant groups within the United States? In the words of Aguirre (2000), is there academic storytelling from the vantage point of non-dominant groups that illuminates how tax-credit scholarship programs, with the best of intentions, may, in fact, continue the marginalization of non-dominant families?

Even with the onset of a new president's administration in Washington D.C., states will continue to experiment with school choice measures, and congressional representatives will continue to push for national legislation. As both federal and state policy makers evaluate the merits of school choice legislation, it would be prudent for them to look to the research. The concern is whose voices will they hear, and whose experiences will they see? As we know, communities of color navigate social institutions, such as private schools, which were often not created with people of color in mind, in a different way than the dominant group (Yosso, 2005b). These communities'

voices and experiences must be recognized as this educational debate continues around the United States.

The United States acts as laboratories of democracy, as famously coined by United States Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis (*New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann, 1932*). Like Florida, many states have or are currently experimenting with school choice efforts to find answers. What the policymakers will find is a significant amount of research on the use of school vouchers and other choice initiatives by members of the dominant group and non-dominant Black families. Yet, missing is the fastest-growing segment of the United States population, the Latinx community (Noe-Bustamante, Lopez, & Krogstad, 2020).

There is a gap in the research pertaining to Latinx families and their participation in school choice for their children (Gooden et al., 2016; Mavrogordato & Harris, 2017; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015; Taylor Haynes, Phillips, & Goldring, 2010). This gap in the literature is problematic as both academia and political leaders continue to evaluate school choice as a viable public policy without research devoted to what is the second-largest demographic group in the United States (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020). This study attempts to address this gap as a means to provide a vehicle for the Latinx community's experiences, thus contributing to a more informed decision by those in power. Critical educators must begin to build the body of research to challenge the dominant narrative. Studies such as this serve as a counterstory (Yosso, 2005a) to this narrative.

Florida has developed its school choice policy; however, it is not alone. Eighteen other states have initiated school choice programs as they evaluate how best to educate

their citizenry (EdChoice, 2019; Suitts, 2011). School choice endeavors vary across each state to include: magnet schools, charter schools, private schools, and homeschooling. In addition to differing on what is offered within each state, how citizens access these educational opportunities differs. Means to access school choice include: open enrollment, school vouchers, education savings accounts (ESAs), and tax credit scholarships. This study focused on the experiences of Latinx parents as they navigated Georgia's school choice efforts by examining Georgia's tax credit scholarship program as experienced by those parents who have used the financial assistance provided to them to move their child(ren) from a public to a private school of their choice.

Although the Trump Administration received a significant amount of focus in its push for a national school choice legislative effort at the federal level, the concept of competition in the educational marketplace is not new (Carl, 2011). Beginning in the 1970s, the federal government began to question the condition of public schools in America (Carl, 2011). In 1983 the Reagan Administration published *A Nation at Risk*, which was a wakeup call that the United States public schools were failing and opened the door to the concept for "competition through the application of business principles" (Mehta, 2013; Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005, p. 345). Since that time, educational reform in the United States has been a focus of politicians on both sides of the aisle. A sizeable part of the educational reform movement has focused on the degree to which parents are offered additional school choice (for a summation of all forms of school choice, Garcia, 2018).

Following the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) by the Bush Administration in 2001, school accountability became a rallying cry for educational

reform advocates. The adopted accountability measures, in many instances, only served to strengthen the perceptions of some Americans that the findings of *A Nation at Risk* were correct; public schools were failing our children. Then in 2009, the Obama Administration followed with their initiative, Race to the Top (RT3), which effectively motivated school choice by demanding that states encourage "a network of innovative and high-achieving" charter schools (White, 2009). Again, the message received was that American public schools were failing. With President Trump's business background and coziness with the Christian right, it should not be a surprise that he would argue for an education policy built upon competition that also opened the door to include private, religious schools.

For the purposes of this ongoing policy debate, the States have already begun their own and varied school choice policy initiatives, therefore providing insights into what is or is not working. States led by conservative politicians used the Federal government's admonishment of public education to their advantage and began to advocate for the very competition to which *A Nation at Risk* opened the door. In 2008, the Georgia General Assembly and then Georgia Governor Sonny Purdue, following the lead from other states, enacted Georgia's Qualified Education Tax Credit. This tax credit allowed Georgia citizens and businesses to shift a portion of their tax obligation away from the Georgia Department of Revenue and to the private school of their choice through a not-for-profit student scholarship organization (SSO). The funds were to be awarded from the SSO directly to the school on behalf of students seeking admittance to the private school who were currently enrolled in a Georgia public school. Recipient students were to use their scholarships to attend the private K-12 schools of their parents'

choice (Georgia GOAL Scholarship, Inc., 2021a). The initial annual cap was set at 50 million dollars.

Since 2008, due to increasing participation in the program, the day on which the cap is reached has occurred increasingly earlier and earlier. This eventually resulted in capped funds being exhausted within hours of the first day of each new year. Calls to increase the cap persisted, and late into the final hours of the 2018 Georgia legislative session, Georgia lawmakers passed House Bill 217. The legislation to increase the annual cap from 50 million dollars to 100 million dollars was signed by then-Governor Nathan Deal (Kelly, 2018). The increase is predicted to have resulted in an additional 10,000 students shifting from public to private schools, causing more concerns about the increased lost state revenues (Klein, 2014).

Numerous sources recorded the enactment of this educational policy. What is not known is the data on the execution of this policy. Advocacy groups, such as the Southern Education Foundation, have asserted since the bill's original passage in 2008 that almost nothing is known relative to how these SSOs are operating, private school accountability data, or demographic information about who is using the tax-funded scholarship (Suitts, 2011). Similarly, in a report to Congress, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) stated that the Georgia Department of Education had no oversight over Georgia's tax credit scholarship program (2019). In addition to researching the experiences of Latinx families in Georgia, this study seeks to shed light on the operations of Georgia's Qualified Education Tax Credit through an examination of the GOAL Scholarship Inc., which has the largest market share of student scholarship organizations (SSOs) in the

State of Georgia. To truly understand the experiences of the growing population of Latinx parents, we must also understand the system in which we study their experiences.

Since 1990, the Latinx population in the United States has increased from 22.6 to 59.9 million (Flores, Lopez, & Krogstad, 2019). This population comprises the largest ethnic group of all non-dominant groups. According to the United States Census Bureau (2018a), by 2060, the Latinx population will comprise almost 30% of the United States population. Since 2010, the American South's Latinx population has grown faster than any other region in the United States (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020). As of 2015, the State of Georgia had the fastest-growing Latinx population in the United States of America, accounting for 10% of the overall population (Flores, 2017). The rapid expansion of the Latinx population in Georgia is an additional impetus to recognize the experiences of these families as they take part in seeking the best educational environment for their children.

### *Statement of Problem*

Georgia's legislature, as well as other state governments, has created a school choice option in order to execute its responsibility to educate its citizenry. Similar to President Trump's assertions, the auspice for Georgia's Qualified Education Tax Credit program was created to assist families for whom private schools were inaccessible due to cost (Suitts, 2011, p. 8). Statistics demonstrate that the Latinx community in Georgia has many of these families for whom private education is economically unattainable. According to the United States Census Bureau (2018b), the Latinx population's median household income is currently $50,486 compared to White ($68,145) and Asian-Americans ($81,331). Only Black Americans have a median household income lower at

$40,258. Thus, if specific communities could benefit from this program, the Latinx community is one.

What is best for our children's education is best for the nation. The debate surrounding the evaluation of our current educational system is necessary, but only with a complete understanding of the research. Although President Trump and other legislators have posited school choice as a means of addressing the plight of non-dominant students trapped in underperforming schools, all student populations are being impacted by these educational policies. Carnoy and Garcia (2017) found that by 2013 more than 40% of Black and Latinx students attended a high-poverty school. In contrast, only 7% of White students attended such schools. Concurring, Gándara (2010) asserted that Latinx students face "triple segregation" based on race, socioeconomic status, and language. These forms of de facto segregation have been, and continue to be, blamed for the achievement gaps between White and Black students as well as between White and Latinx students (Boschma & Brownstein, 2016).

With that being said, the problem remains that there is not enough research about how the Latinx community participates in school choice programs, such as the one created by Georgia's elected representatives. To answer what is best for all children, this study evaluated how Latinx parents, as critical stakeholders, are experiencing current school choice programs. More specifically, how Latinx parents are experiencing Georgia's tax credit scholarship program. Further, to what degree this population is accessing these funds, as originally posited by those supporting the legislative effort, was evaluated. Given the growth of these families, as a percent of the overall population within the United States, there is a significant need to provide answers. The answers

address a significant gap in the literature, to better inform policymakers of the actual implementation of the legislation enacted, and to inform community leaders as similar school choice legislation is brought to the forefront.

### *Significance of Study*

Georgia, as well as the United States, continues to experience significant increases in the size of the Latinx population (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts, 2019). Estimations indicate that by 2027 Latinx students will comprise up to one-third of public school enrollment, significantly higher than any other non-dominant group and only second behind White students, who are anticipated to be 45% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). This will be the largest Latinx student population in the history of the United States. Thus, more research is needed to understand this population better as Latinx parents become more established in all educational communities. The dearth of empirical studies focused on this community establishes an even greater need for a comprehensive understanding of the decisions and behavior of Latinx parents as they navigate school choice. Solórzano, Villalpando, and Oseguera (2005) implore scholars to investigate every point in the educational pipeline to better understand Latinx students' educational achievement. This study serves as an analysis of an overlooked point in the pipeline.

Given the increasing quantity of school choice programs across the United States, and possibly a pending national program, this study will examine what led these parents to desire to pull their child(ren) from the public education system, their experience(s) obtaining and keeping the scholarship funds, what characteristics attracted them to their chosen private school, and their experiences once their child(ren) enroll at the private

school of their choice. This research will serve to better inform policymakers as to what barriers or opportunities Latinx families are presently facing. Additionally, this research may lead to considerations of what policies may need to shift or change as the pursuit for providing *all* (emphasis added) Americans with the best educational outcomes continues.

From a Freirean perspective, researchers cannot ignore the political nature of schooling. Similarly, as political scientists, economists, and politicians argue philosophically over what is the best form of education, it is the job of researchers to provide the voice of parents, particularly those of marginalized communities, who seek to provide their children with the best educational opportunities available to them. Yosso (2005a) implores critical educators to seek out the experiential knowledge of People of Color in order to challenge schooling that pretends to be neutral and to transform society. It is likely that policymakers will vote again on similar legislation and can be armed with knowledge about the experiences of these parents as they navigate the legislative effort they craft. This study serves as a vehicle for a community that has not been given an adequate platform to be heard as they pursue what they believe to be their child's best educational opportunity.

### *Research Questions*

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do Latinx parents describe the key factors that led them to participate in Georgia's tax credit scholarship program to enroll their child(ren) in a local private school instead of the traditional public school the student would otherwise attend?

2. What are the experiences of Latinx parents in receiving and maintaining their child's voucher for initial and continued enrollment in private school?
3. On what do Latinx parents base their decision of schooling for their child's private school of choice?
4. What are the experiences of Latinx parents who successfully navigated Georgia's tax credit scholarship program once their child is enrolled in a private school?

The research questions above were crafted to address the study's purpose: to fill in the identified research gap pertaining to how Latinx parents are navigating school choice in Georgia. The answers provided insights into the experiences of Latinx parents as they participated and navigated Georgia's tax credit scholarship program. Each question was constructed to elicit the participants' meaning that they assigned to each step that is central to making the transition of their child(ren) from public schooling to private schooling. Similarly, each question narrowed down on a critical piece of participation in school choice. The questions were drafted to move the researcher, participant, and reader from the beginning of the school choice experience to the conclusion: the beginning being the decision-making process that went into changing their child's educational setting and the end is how they have experienced the new educational setting.

The experience began with research question one, where the parent(s), for their own reason(s), began to contemplate moving their child(ren) from their districted public school to a private school. The answer to question two dealt with a key piece to this move, which was the initial research and application for financial assistance from a student-scholarship organization (SSO) and their experience(s) maintaining this crucial

support. Question three allows us to identify why each Latinx parent selected the school of their choice. This is key to understanding what Latinx parents are looking for in an educational setting. Question four culminates with an understanding of what the Latinx parents experienced once their child(ren) enrolled in their chosen private school. The satisfaction or displeasure may indicate the future participation of Latinx families in this program.

The questions were also drafted to address the theoretical framework. The theories employed for this study included market theory, rational-choice theory, and Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit). Questions one and three related to market theory. Because there is a choice provided within Georgia, parents were able to enter a market of educational settings. Question three specifically addressed rational-choice theory and provided insights into the knowledge that these parents had about the market and why they made the choice they did in selecting their school amongst all the options. Lastly, within the answers to all four research questions, there are aspects of LatCrit that emerged from the interviews with the participants.

Being a non-dominant person in the United States has many challenges and barriers. Entering a market, private schooling, which was not created with the Latinx community in mind, revealed barriers to their entry and/or their experiences. This is a critical component to this research as school choice has served as a benefit of the privileged class within American society. Similarly, the experiences of the Latinx community cannot be assumed to be the same as other non-dominant groups that have been represented in the current body of research on school choice.

### *Research Goals*

Maxwell (2013) asserted that separating one's research from their own life is harmful to good research (Chapter 2, Personal, Practical, and Intellectual Goals, para. 2). The human experience is not one that can occur in a sterile, objective environment to be scientifically quantified. Qualitative research is predicated on the meaning people give to their experiences and the context in which the experiences occur. Clandinin (2013) concurred, arguing that "readers often understand an inquiry in more depth when they are able to see the researcher's personal justification in the research texts" (p. 36). As a researcher, my own experiences have led to my decision to propose this dissertation. I reflected on my own personal, practical, and intellectual goals. Such reflection is a key part of understanding many of the key components of my dissertation design, and for justifying the research, I wish to undertake.

As a private school administrator, I have witnessed the impact the Georgia Qualified Educational Expense program has had on my school. As an educator, I knew of the school choice movement that appeared to be catching more momentum but was ignorant of how it would be implemented and what the repercussions would be. I have two personal goals: to learn more about Georgia's school choice option; and to better understand the philosophical underpinnings of both sides of the policy debate. As a resident of Georgia, it made sense to study a program that impacts my job, my family, and other families in my community. I am also a social justice proponent and recognize that I have many privileges as a result of my classification. I seek to help communities that do not experience the same privileges that I have. The Latinx community has

explicit and implicit barriers to overcome in the United States, and I hope to be someone who can at least identify, if not provide vehicles to overcome, these barriers.

Practically speaking, I, like all educators, desire what is best for children. This is not a dissertation to argue the merits of educational choice or to decry the public policy concerns with implementing school choice on a state or national level. This dissertation proposal is about practicality. There is philosophy, which is where a paper on school choice belongs, and there is the reality of how everyday people navigate the policies that state and federal legislatures enact. The Latinx community has contributed so much to the United States of America, and their experiences and voices need to be examined and heard.

Intellectually, the stories shared by the parents that participate in my study will be useful for understanding the school choice debate. The debate over school choice lacks foundation when the actual experiences of the families and children are not considered. As indicated earlier, the Latinx community is set to grow exponentially in the State of Georgia and the United States in the twenty-first century. How this community is experiencing this program is vital to further evaluations of the validity of such programs across the United States. Legislators who are elected to enact policies on behalf of their citizens should rely upon research to support or refute legislative measures. At this time, with respect to the Latinx community, such research is barely existent. This study will give insight into what is being experienced by one of the very communities that this program is intended to help.

## *Conceptual Framework*

The conceptual framework is the binding that holds together one's research. Ravitch and Riggan (2017) highlighted the importance of a researcher's conceptual framework by describing it as the ballast of the ship, always guiding the study as it develops. My framework follows Maxwell's (2013) recommended four key components of one's conceptual framework: experiential knowledge, existing theory and research, pilot and exploratory research, and thought experiments (Chapter 3, Conceptual Framework). See Figure 1 for a visual depiction of my conceptual framework.

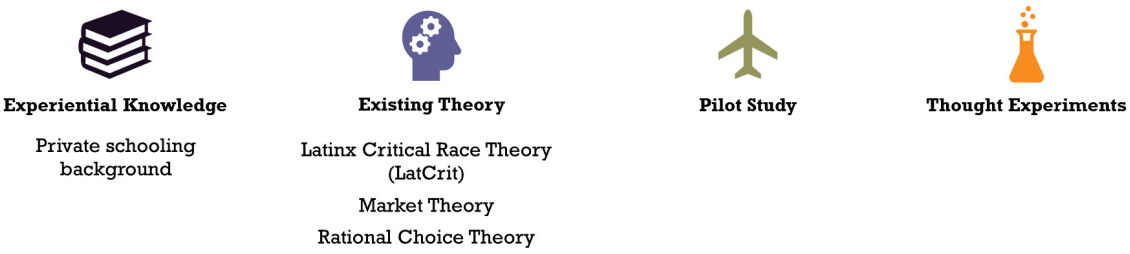


*Figure 1*: Conceptual Framework

### *Experiential Knowledge*

Experiential knowledge is the personal experience(s), background, and technical knowledge that a researcher brings to his/her study. According to Maxwell (2013), experiential knowledge "is both one of the most important conceptual resources and the one that is most seriously neglected…" (The Value of Research Paradigms, para 9). It is common for researchers to treat their own experiences and identity as a form of bias that must be shunned from making any sort of appearance in their work. Patton (2015) concurs in his argument that qualitative research is personal and "what brings you to an

inquiry matters" (p. 3). Thus, attempting to cut off experience(s) from the research one is about to embark upon is not wise.

My interest in school choice in Georgia began as I experienced as an educator a different educational world than the one I had experienced as a student. I have now been in education for over a decade. All of my personal education had been in the public education setting. However, all of my own teaching experience other than student teaching, and leadership experience, has been in the private education setting. Other than a friend with wealthy parents who left for a few years in high school, I never even thought about private education since public education was all I knew. As far as I was concerned, private education was for wealthy people, by which I was not surrounded. My educational world greatly expanded when I accepted a job in the summer of 2009 at a small private Catholic high school (actually the one my wealthy friend attended). I quickly realized my own ignorance, as all of the students at the school were not rich kids. Some students, to my surprise, not only received financial aid from the institution but were also receiving financial aid from a program enacted by the Georgia legislature the year before.

The school in which I worked decided to work with GOAL Scholarship Inc., as the student scholarship organization (SSO) from where financial aid was distributed. As a teacher, I was not privy to which students were on the GOAL scholarship, the processes the school went through to award these funds, nor the processes the families went through to receive these funds. It was not until I joined the administrative team that I became more aware of our financial aid process and our GOAL Scholarship students. As a public school product, I often imagined what these students were experiencing in this

place that often still felt so foreign to me. After all, it was in this new setting that I, even though a member of the privileged dominant group, for the first time in my life, felt a degree of "Husserlian otherness" (Moran & Cohen, 2012) compared to the lives of many of my students. My sense of shared life experiences with these students who may have only attended this school, thanks to Georgia's tax credit scholarship, only intensified my own interest in them individually. Furthermore, the new program that was adopted the year before I began to work in this environment became an additional point of focus.

Over time I began to inquire more about the GOAL Scholarship, the processes that our families and the academic institution had to go through to obtain the financial assistance, and the politics behind the school choice movement in Georgia. As the spouse of a public school teacher, debates about the program, the families that were served at my school, and the potential impacts of the State of Georgia allowing those funds to go to this endeavor became somewhat regular. Similarly, over time I grew to become more aware of the struggles of our Latinx population and felt that they were being underserved by this program. When I decided upon school choice as a research topic and ran across the Peabody Journal of Education article (Gooden et al., 2016) in which the researchers identified the use of school vouchers by the Latinx population as being a gap in our literature, I knew I had to pursue this as my dissertation topic.

### *Theoretical Frameworks*

In this qualitative study, the following theoretical framework provides the lenses that shape what is examined, and the questions asked (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The theoretical lenses are market theory, rational choice theory, and Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit). Each of these theoretical lenses indicates how the researcher positioned

himself in this study and will provide a basis for the development of themes, the final written accounts, and the future recommendations. Figure 2 depicts how the theoretical frameworks executed within this study work within the real world.

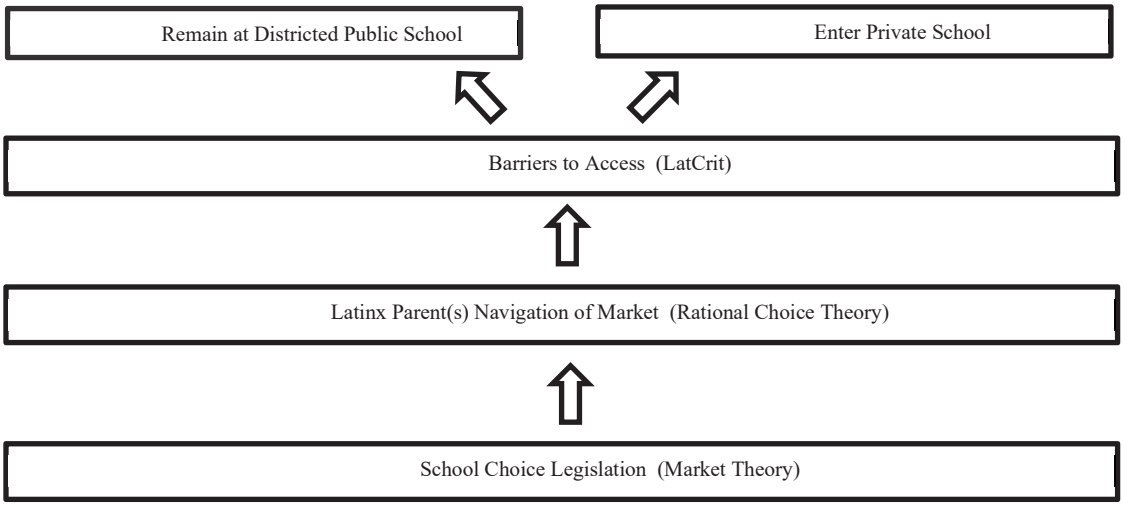


*Figure 2*: Theoretical Framework

The environment in which this study occurred is heavily influenced by the economic and educational policymaking of past and current Georgia elected representatives. The economic policy that has driven the idea of giving citizens a choice in the education of their children is called market theory. This study focused on how Latinx parents are executing their freedom to choose within this educational marketplace.

As with every market, there is a process that a consumer navigates toward a final decision on a product. These Latinx parents will go through some sort of decision-making in selecting their child(ren)'s new educational setting. To evaluate how these Latinx parents are going about selecting their child(ren)'s educational institution within this market, the rational choice theory was employed.

Lastly, in this research study, the participants represent a non-dominant group in the United States of America. Non-dominant groups have historically suffered systemic obstacles to their equal participation, and confronted injustices from simple barriers to their existence up to blatant, even violent, racism (Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Padilla, 2001; Yosso, 2005a). Because of this historical understanding, there is a strong argument to employ critical race theory, more specifically Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit) (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

All three of these theories have been employed in other school choice studies. As with any theory, its relevance lies in the eye of the beholder after evaluating all the factors taken in within the specific study. Nevertheless, no theory is devoid of critics. Market theory is often employed in the evaluation of any market-based research that occurs within a capitalistic society. As will be demonstrated, this theory has a long history. As with all economic theories, there are philosophical criticisms and disagreements. Rational-choice theory is often tied with market theory, especially in support of school choice (Gooden et al., 2016). Although it is often employed, just like market theory, it also has its detractors. There is ongoing debate of which theory best encompasses human decision-making and all the processes and environmental factors that account for it. Critical race theory, over the past two to three decades, has increasingly been employed in studies that involve non-dominant populations in the United States (although it is beginning to be employed elsewhere in the world now as well). While it appears to be more readily accepted as a valid approach in studies dealing with non-dominant groups within American society, there are still criticisms that it is

merely “a rhetoric of victimization” (Subotnik, 1998, p. 692) or that it is merely “negative dialectics” offering a “false sense of racial difference” (Mocombe, 2017, p. 83).

**Market theory.** Market theory, also known as classical economic theory or economic liberalism, has its philosophical birth in Adam Smith’s *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776). Smith argued for a laissez-faire economic system because self-interest results in societal prosperity. Societal prosperity is achieved as producers are forced to improve their product, or to lower its cost, thus leaving the consumer as the winner in a free market. School choice, as a concept and as a model being promulgated across multiple states, is based upon the injection of market-based competition in education. Milton Friedman (1955), widely considered the earliest contemporary American theorist in applying market theory to the educational marketplace, argued that public schools operated as monopolies. Monopolies, Freidman claimed, have little incentive to innovate, create high-quality products, or keep prices low, and the consumer loses out. Coons and Sugarman (1978) and Chubb and Moe (1990) have since been consistently recognized for advancing the banner of this concept.

The contention of school choice advocates is that in a market environment, all schools, public and private, will operate more efficiently, at a lower cost, and will respond better to the needs of the families within each community (Garcia, 2018; Hoxby, 1998, 2003). School choice proponents maintain that putting the choice of a child’s education in the hands of the parent(s) is the most simplistic form of local control.

Essentially, parents will weigh their schooling options based upon the needs and the best interest of their child(ren). They will then select the school that is of most utility to them. Like businesses and private enterprises, schools will thus be driven by the

decisions of parents, and each school will have to meet their demands to attract and retain students in order to survive. The assumption is, in a competitive educational marketplace, that parents will pull their children from low-performing schools causing these schools to close, thus leaving successful schools as the only options. This market-based philosophy is believed to improve the delivery of the service, specifically the education provided.

Market theory in education decentralizes the choice of schools to the parents and, as a result, schools compete to be chosen as their school of choice. The parents become a consumer of a good, which is their child's education. In theory, being able to better match students to schools increases the possibility of positive educational outcomes. Similarly, this competition is theorized to better the overall educational opportunities of all schools as they are driven by the ever-changing school market as opposed to the inefficiencies created by the public school monopoly. Critics of market theory advocated that applying Adam Smith's "invisible hand" to education "dictates winners and losers in the educational marketplace while parents' school-related goals for their children remain either tacit, undocumented or both" (Garn & Cobb, 2008, p. 14).

The research question most closely tied to market theory is research question one. Research question one explores the decision(s) that the Latinx parents go through as they decide to remove their child from their districted public school and participate in the educational marketplace. Without additional schooling options and the financial aid given through the Georgia tax-credit scholarship program, these parents would not be able to partake in this market. This is a flaw in market theory as non-dominant

populations often do not have the same access to markets, as members of the dominant group (Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Simms & Talbert, 2019).

**Rational choice theory (RCT).** Rational choice theory (also called choice theory or rational action theory) is an approach in the social sciences (economics, sociology, anthropology, and political science) to understand human behavior. The birth of this theory dates back to some of the earliest philosophers during the Age of Reason. Oppenheimer (2008) gives credit to Thomas Hobbes, in his work *Leviathan* (1651), for initially positing that a person's individual choice stemmed from one's "appetites" or "aversions." He also notes that Adam Smith famously asserted in *the Wealth of Nations* (1776), "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest" (p. 119). To describe rational choice theory, Green (2002) use the tomatoes market as an example:

> A rational choice analysis of the market for fresh tomatoes, for example, would generally involve a description of (i) the desired purchases of tomatoes by buyers, (ii) the desired production and sales of tomatoes by sellers, and (iii) how these desired purchases and desired sales interact to determine the price and quantity sold of tomatoes in the market. The typical tomato buyer is faced with the problem of how much of his income (or more narrowly, his food budget) to spend on tomatoes as opposed to some other good or service. The typical tomato seller is faced with the problem of how many tomatoes to produce and what price to charge for them. (p. 4)

The rational choice theory asserts that markets operate the way they do because of the unfathomable number of decisions people make to maximize utility, or to satisfy their

perceived best interest. Ultimately, after evaluating all alternatives, people act in what they perceive to be their best interest (cost/benefit analysis). There are three assumptions of rational choice theory: (1) the consumer faces a known set of alternative choices, (2) completeness, and (3) transitivity. Completeness means that every action can be ranked. Let us suppose there are three possible actions: A, B, and C. None of these options have an equal value to each other. Action A is preferable to action B. Action B is preferable to action C. At no time would action B or action C be preferable to A because that would be irrational. Transitivity means that if we look at those three options (A, B, and C), then A is also preferable to C.

Rational choice theory is accepted as classical liberal economics, specifically consistent with Adam Smith's assertion in *Wealth of Nations* (1776) that acting in one's self-interest can create benefits for the larger economic atmosphere (invisible hand theory). Classical economics assumes that consumers are informed, which opponents of rational choice theory assert is not always the case. This is where the concept of bounded rationality, which is when consumers have limits on information, time, and abilities comes into play. This study, and the greater school choice movement, assert that parents will act in what they believe to be their child's best interest. It is further assumed that each parent is selecting what the parent(s) believe(s) to be a "good school." Knowing what constitutes a "good school" is not only subjective, but also may lead to irrational decisions.

Rational choice theory was employed when discussing how and why Latinx parents go about choosing their child's school. Research question three seeks to clarify what Latinx parents consider when choosing their child's private school. Research

question three dives a little deeper into exactly what procedures the Latinx parent makes to move their child(ren) to a new educational community. This research question focuses upon the work between the parent(s), the student-scholarship organization (SSO), and the school to financially support the Latinx child's change in educational setting. Research question four focuses on the Latinx parents' evaluations of their choices for their child(ren)'s private school. Utilizing rational choice theory as a lens allows insight into what criteria Latinx parents consider and what barriers may exist to limit their judgment or eventual enrollment. Critics of rational choice theory assert that humans are not always rational; and they often make decisions based upon factors such as their emotions without weighing the benefits and costs. Wittek, Snijders, and Nee (2013) identify that most of the problems in rational choice theory relate to assumptions "of neoclassical economics, in particular the assumption of atomized interaction between rational and selfish actors with full information, taking place in perfect markets" (p. 3). Similarly, critics claim that parents are often ill-informed about what constitutes "good schooling," and others may face language problems compounding their confusion (Godwin & Kemerer, 2002, p. 196). This critique was evaluated based upon the qualitative data, since being a parent is often an emotional endeavor, and there are likely emotional stresses in dealing with making educational decisions for one's child(ren).

**Critical race theory (CRT).** Critical race theory (CRT) should be employed when studying non-dominant groups in the United States. Critical race theory has its roots in 1970s American legal scholarship, known as Critical Legal Studies (CLS), where a group of law professors and students began to question the American legal system's objectivist nature, the legal adjudication in the United States judicial system, and the

stalling of civil rights advancements (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lynn & Parker, 2006; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Tate, 1997). Although the CLS scholars advanced a critical analysis of United States inequalities in justice, they failed to include racism in its critique (Ladson-Billings, 1998). This omission can be largely attributed to the Marxist (Marx & Engels, 2012) underpinnings of all critical scholarship (Jackson, 2018). While acknowledging the economic power conditions (class struggle) that drive Marxism, the failure to recognize race as a necessary lens to view US American society led to a split. Led by Derrick Bell (described as the movement's intellectual "father figure" by Delgado), scholars who recognized that racism had become so normalized that it was woven into the American social order began the critical race theory.

Americans must recognize that race and racism are central to many aspects of our society, with our educational system being a central institution enveloped in both. Critical race theory is a research lens, which accepts the aforementioned statement and challenges traditional deficit views of communities of color by focusing on these communities' cultural assets and wealth. Likewise, Critical race theory must also be employed within this study because a critique of rational choice theory is that it often ignores factors tied to race, social contexts, and structural barriers (Cooper, 2005; Gooden et al., 2016).

Critical race theory (CRT) employs an interdisciplinary perspective spanning many disciplines, and to truly understand school choice and the experiences of Latinx parents, researchers must look at both historical and contemporary contexts (Solórzano 1997, 1998; Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). In the case of this study,

history and law are both appropriate. Schools have borne the blame for playing a powerful role in creating and continuing racial inequality (Zamudio et al., 2011). The very concept of school vouchers in the United States first manifested itself in societal and institutional racism that plagued this country in the 1950s (Wearne, 2013), and as initially stated in the introduction, race is still being used as a key argument today. Yosso (2005b) defined critical race theory as being "conceived as a social justice project that works toward the liberatory potential of schooling" (p. 74). Critical race theory's devotion to a social justice agenda is a lens through which the researcher analyzes the school choice option in Georgia and Latinx parents' experiences as they navigate this program. Similarly, using narrative research as the research method to give voice to this marginalized community is purposefully linked to critical race theory.

Initially, critical race theory (CRT) focused upon the Black/White binary. Since its founding, critical race theory has branched out to encompass other peoples. Today there is LatCrit, TribalCrit, AsianCrit, and WhiteCrit. The participants in this study were Latinx parents making Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit) an appropriate lens. LatCrit has been traced back to Rodolfo Acuna's work, *Occupied America*, which considered American history in terms of U.S. colonization of land formerly held by México, and how colonization has played out for Mexicans living in that land (Stefancic, 1997). Considered two LatCrit theoretical leaders, Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso (2002) asserted that critical race theory "advances a strategy to foreground and account for the role of race and racism in education and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of opposing or eliminating other forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, language, and national origin" (p. 25). This study's focus on

Latinx parents as participants, and the evaluation of how they are navigating Georgia's educational options, made the use of LatCrit essential.

In a strong retort of Bourdieuean cultural capital theory, Yosso (2005b) introduced the concept of community cultural wealth pertaining to schooling. Yosso identified six primary categories of capital that students of color bring with them to navigate a world dominated by race as they struggle toward racial and social justice. *Aspirational capital* is the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for a better future, even in the face of real or perceived barriers. *Linguistic capital* includes the social and intellectual skills to bridge two linguistic systems. *Familial capital* refers to the cultural knowledge that harnesses a greater sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition. *Social capital* refers to community resources and the networks of people that may help a person navigate situations and institutions. *Navigational capital* is the skillset that communities of color develop as they maneuver through societal institutions created without them in mind. *Resistant capital* is the knowledge and skillset instilled through oppositional behavior, challenging inequality. The researcher was mindful of the Latinx's community cultural wealth as interviews with the participants were completed. The interviews with the participants demonstrated each of the aforementioned forms of capital. This consistency is demonstrated in the themes that emerged from the data (detailed in chapter four). The presence of these forms of capital also confirmed that all three employed theoretical lenses (LatCrit, market theory, and RCT) fit very well within this study.

These forms of cultural and asset capital are believed to better explain what Latinx parents may be experiencing as they navigate Georgia's school choice private

school options. All four of the research questions have answers that fall within the LatCrit framework. There is no doubt that Latinx parents (and their children) face unique challenges tied to their identity. Experiences, choices, and decision factors are often cultural and based upon one's economic situation, social environment, and other factors. One would expect, in this study, to see a consistent theme or pattern of aspirational, social, and navigational capital present in the lived experiences of the research participants as they seek the best educational opportunity for their child(ren). These families are entering educational settings created without them in mind, with the possible exception of Catholic schooling. Similarly, the parents are navigating a series of processes to obtain financial aid that is equivalent to what families experience as their child(ren) enters college through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) process.

### *Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions*

**Limitations.** Although significant efforts have been taken to improve the credibility of this study, there are several factors that pose as limitations. The use of purposeful sampling, the small sample size, the localized nature of the study, as well as the selected form of qualitative inquiry framework, narrative inquiry, may be considered limitations. In chapter five, these limitations are thoroughly addressed.

**Delimitations.** Set in the context of Georgia, the findings of this qualitative study were delimited to Latinx families who have already chosen to move their child(ren) from a public educational setting to a private, Catholic school. This research study did not investigate the experiences of Latinx parents who chose other types of private school settings. This research study also did not examine the experiences of other members of

non-dominant groups as there is a body of research already devoted to other non-dominant groups, such as Black Americans.

An evaluation of school choice as a sound public policy was not conducted within this study. This study did not seek to explore any potential relationship between vouchers and other aspects such as academic achievement, segregation, or educational inequalities. This study seeks to shed light on the actual experiences of those who are navigating Georgia's school choice laws as written by Georgia-elected officials. A summary of the philosophical underpinnings of school choice was provided in chapter two for the benefit of those less familiar. Similarly, both critiques and praise for Georgia's program were noted to strengthen the understanding of the background in which the study participants are living their stories.

**Assumptions**. The Latinx parents serving as participants were assumed to be honest in their interview responses. It was also assumed that the Latinx parents moved their child(ren) from a public school to a Catholic school because they were either unhappy with some aspect of their child's zoned public school, or they were seeking out aspects believed to be central to Catholic schools.

### *Definition of Terms*

The following are key terms pertinent to this study:

*Navigating*: This term includes the process of inquiry through the experiences of the participants.

*Districted Public School*: This is the public school assigned to students based upon the location of their home, which falls within defined school attendance boundaries

(Garcia, 2018). Sometimes it is referred to as a student's "zoned" public school (Sattin-Bajaj, 2015).

*Latinx*: This study explored the experiences of parents who identified as Latina/o. There is significant research devoted to the long history of struggling with how to best identify these peoples and who has the authority to decide what they are collectively known as, if these peoples even desire to be placed in a collective box (Wallerstein, 2005). These peoples have at one time been identified as Latin-American, Hispanic, Latina/o, Latin@. For the purposes of this study, this population is identified as Latinx, which was the most accepted and inclusive term within academia at the time (Thorsos, Martínez, & Gabriel, 2020).

*Neoliberalism*: A re-emergence of the classical liberal philosophies centered around the efficiencies of free-market competition (Potterson, 2020; Rios, 2008). Neoliberal advocates assert that school choice is the best mechanism for education (Howard & Navarro, 2016).

*Student Scholarship Organization (SSO)*: Student scholarship organizations (SSOs) are charitable organizations to which Georgia individual and corporate taxpayers can contribute in exchange for a state income tax credit (Levin, 2013). These organizations then disperse the money on behalf of qualified students directly to the specific school designated by the individual taxpayer or corporation. Within the body of literature, these organizations are often referred to as scholarship granting organizations (SGOs) (Government Accountability Office, 2019) or as scholarship organizations (SOs) (Welner, 2008).

*Qualified Education Expense (QEE):* This tax credit is the mechanism that allows individual or corporate taxpayers to decrease their tax liability to the State of Georgia by shifting a portion of their tax liability to a student scholarship organization (SSO) (Government Accountability Office, 2019).

*Neovoucher*: This term describes the funds provided by the student scholarship organization to financially assist public school students who transition to private schools (Welner, 2008).

*Private schools*: Schools autonomous of government regulation that are supported by a private organization or individuals, including religious institutions (Garcia, 2018). These schools are sometimes also referred to as "independent schools."

*Socioeconomic status (SES)*: The position of persons in society based on a combination of occupational, economic, and educational criteria (Garcia, 2018).

*Voucher*: An arrangement whereby public funds are made available to qualified parents to cover some or all of the expenses associated with enrolling their child in a participating private school of their choosing (Wolf, 2005).

# Chapter II

# REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

## *Introduction*

The most significant challenge facing this study was the lack of previous research conducted on this population, in relation to the study's topic. The dearth of research on how Latinx families navigate school choice has been acknowledged by other scholars (Gooden et al., 2016; Mavrogordato & Harris, 2017; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015; Taylor Haynes, Phillips, & Goldring, 2010). In addition, no research was found that delved into the experiences of any families navigating school choice in the state of Georgia.

For chapter two, I attempted to account for both these glaring omissions. To account for the exclusion of the Latinx population, the researcher sought studies that included Latinx participants (parents and/or students) in other areas of navigating educational choice throughout the United States. Although only a few articles corresponded with this study, the other articles cited did bear some relevant implications.

In addition, to provide a better understanding of the political/societal background of this study, a short history on school choice in the United States and the school choice movement in Georgia are also provided. Understanding school choice from its philosophical founding, in addition to how it has unfolded in the state of Georgia, is essential to a full understanding this research study. After all, it is within this current

political/social/educational reality that the participants live as they experience Georgia's school choice option.

### *Previous Research*

**Gap in literature.** Despite a rise in both school choice efforts and Latinx enrollment in schools, there is a gap in the literature as to how Latinx parents are participating in and experiencing school choice options (Gooden et al., 2016; Mavrogordato & Harris, 2017; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015; Taylor Haynes et al., 2010). Of the scant literature about Latinx parent choice, a few studies deal with open enrollment, magnet school programs, and charter schools (Golann, Debs, & Weiss, 2019; Mavrogordato & Harris, 2017; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015; Waitoller & Super, 2017). A few other studies deal with the college choice process (Pérez & McDonough, 2008). Other research articles, which include the Latinx population and school vouchers, focus upon the attitudes that the Latinx community (and other populations) hold toward school vouchers (Leal, 2004; Robinson & English, 2016).

**Latinx parents' experiences using vouchers.** The sole research article found that matched the topic of this study was by Joseph, Vélez, and Antrop-Gonázlez (2017). In this study, they evaluated the experiences of low-income Latinx families who used a voucher to attend a parochial school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Milwaukee is chosen upon because it was the United States first publicly funded private school voucher program, created in 1990. Using snowball sampling, they interviewed four sets of Latinx parents as participants. The experiences shared by the Latinx parents demonstrated barriers to their participation in their child(ren)'s education and a lack of support for the

Latinx culture and Spanish language. These negative experiences resulted in low parental involvement.

**Barriers to Latinx participation in school choice.** Previous research indicates that there are several barriers that exist for Latinx families who desire to participate in school choice initiatives. These barriers impact the choice efforts of Latinx parents to enter, evaluate, and navigate school choice options. Similarly, their Latinx students are also impacted directly and indirectly because of these barriers. These barriers are also expected to affect this study's outcome.

One barrier often cited in the participation of the Latinx population in school choice is language. Although the percentage of bilingual Latinx peoples is increasing, schools that essentially operate as English only are harming Latinx parents and the school's educators alike by these language constraints (Bohon, Macpherson, & Atiles, 2005; Joseph et al., 2017). Many formal sources of information related to school choice and schools of which to choose from are often only in English (Mavrogordato & Harris, 2017; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015). The impact of English-only materials may cause Latinx parents, who are not proficient in English, to either not participate in school choice or to rely upon their child(ren) to navigate the school choice process. Similarly, schools often opt only to provide in-person school information in English while perhaps translating online resources. This assumption of internet access only serves to compound the hurdles of Latinx families who desire to evaluate their child's school options (Sattin-Bajaj, 2015). In addition to harming the abilities of Latinx parents to navigate in this environment, English-only practices serve as a significant barrier for Latinx students who themselves may be in a varying degree of being an

English language learner (ELL). This barrier serves to cut off Latinx parents and students as demonstrated by Mavrogordato and Harris (2017), who found that parents of current English learner (EL) students enrolled their students in their non-districted public school less than parents of English proficient student and former ELs.

Another significant barrier to school choice for Latinx families is poverty. Godwin and Kemerer (2002) asserted that what has been established with public school choice is the higher a family's socioeconomic status, the more likely they are to participate in school choice (p. 7). This assertion is corroborated by Taylor Haynes et al. (2010), who found that Latinx families who participated in school choice tended to be middle class. As of 2016, the median wealth for Latinx families was just above $20,000 in comparison to White families who had a median wealth of over $140,000 (Solomon & Weller, 2018). In 2017, while only accounting for approximately 18.3% of the total population in the United States, Latinx population accounted for 27.2% of the population in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). In evaluating the experiences and choices of Latinx parents as they participate in school choice, poverty and socioeconomic status are most assuredly going to be apparent.

In multiple studies, Latinx parents indicated that a school's location is important in their selection of a school (Joseph et al., 2017; Taylor Haynes et al., 2010; Waitoller & Super, 2017). This is key as Latinx parents were also demonstrated in these same studies to be the least likely to have the economic resources, such as reliable transportation to and from a school located at greater distances from their home. Yet again, Latinx parents find themselves at an economic disadvantage in the school choice process.

Cultural barriers also make it more difficult for some Latinx parents, especially ELLs, to participate in their child(ren)'s education and to engage in the school choice process. A lack of understanding of the American educational culture has been demonstrated to impact Latinx families negatively. Focusing on Latinx education in Georgia, Bohon, Macpherson, and Atiles (2005) as well as Mavrogordato and Stein (2016) found several differences between the American culture and Latinx culture that caused misunderstandings between the school and Latinx families, ultimately negatively impacting the Latinx students and community. Low parental involvement, due in large part to the inherent trust the Latinx community has in the educators, fed the myth that Latinx parents do not value education (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005; Hill & Torres, 2010). At times, misunderstandings were also documented to have resulted in Latinx students being denied enrollment if their parents were not present for registration. Similar concerns about the perceived financial constraints, such as clothing, books, and other expenses, have led some immigrant families to be reluctant to enroll their children.

Sattin-Bajaj (2015) completed a study on how Latinx middle schoolers ($N = 46$) navigate high school choice in New York City. The participants' parents were either first or second-generation immigrants. Sattin-Bajaj reported that Latinx immigrant parents in New York City had significant philosophical differences compared to European-American peers. Where European-American parents were more involved in the most traditional sense, the Latinx parents did not actively participate in their children's high school choice, instead relying heavily upon their trust of their children to navigate the school choice options available. What Sattin-Bajaj found instead was that these Latinx children often settled for their districted public school and were thus not able to attend the

most selective schools. This lack of understanding of the American educational culture among some Latinx parents, particularly immigrant families, significantly impacts Latinx participation in their child(ren)'s education and likely will impact their abilities to participate in Georgia's tax credit scholarship program.

Documentation status has been indicated as a barrier to Latinx parent participation in their child's schooling. In addition, the fact that financial assistance to participate in school choice comes from the state further complicates the participation of some within the Latinx community. During my pilot study, the participant indicated a concern of other parents in the Latinx community with the need to go through government channels to obtain financial assistance in order to participate in Georgia's school choice option. Attempting to fill the research gap in parents' documentation status concerns and a traditional notion of school involvement, Cross et al. (2019) found that documentation status serves as an additional barrier to Latinx parental school involvement. They further reported doubts within immigrant communities that schools would protect student records, according to the *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act* (FERPA, 1974) from being shared with immigration enforcement agencies. In addition, Yoshikawa (2011) demonstrated that parents with documentation-status concerns are less likely to use government resources like public libraries and to interact with governmental agencies. Undocumented parents or mixed-status families face real concerns with participating in Georgia's school choice program for the schooling of their children, some of whom are United States citizens themselves.

### *Literature Conclusion*

This chapter examined the relationship between the Latinx community and school choice in the United States. The theoretical framework employed in this study were Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit), market theory, and rational choice theory (RCT). All three lenses through which this study has been viewed align closely with the major themes found within the literature. The most present theme throughout the literature was the barriers to the participation of the Latinx community in today's school choice marketplace. To challenge and overcome these barriers, Latinx parents (and their children) have had to utilize their community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005b). A second theme is the negative result of these barriers on the engagement of Latinx parents in the educational marketplace and the choice available. This study adds to the body of literature by demonstrating the continuation of barriers to Latinx parents as they seek the best educational opportunities for their child(ren). This study also stands to fill in a crucial research gap on the experiences of Latinx parents as they navigate school choice in Georgia.

## *Catholic Education and Latinx Peoples in the United States*

Today, Catholic education is seen as an institution that has historically supported Latinx families within the United States. This is due in large part to the Catholic Church's social justice teachings in the United States as early as the 19th century. Although a positive relationship has historically existed in the United States, there is concern for the continuation of this relationship. In the early to mid-20th century, Latinx Catholics represented approximately 5% of the total U.S. Catholic population (Ospino & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2016). Today, more than 40% of all Catholics are Latinx and almost

60% of Catholics under the age of 18 are Latinx (Ospino & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2016). Although representing over half of school-age Catholics in the United States, only 4% of Latinx children attend a Catholic school (Oliveira, Cho, & Barbieri, 2021).

It is important to separate Catholic education in the United States and Catholic education in Latin America. Catholic education in the United States has a different history than in Latin America. In Latin America, Catholic education has been seen as an extension of elite exclusion of others. In the United States, Catholic education has been seen as a private education endeavor accessible to all socioeconomic families, strongly tied to the late-19th century Catholic social justice teachings. Although this history made it accessible to "White" European Catholics like the Irish and Germans, it was the Catholic schools that were accessible and key to the early Latinx communities.

Catholic education in the United States can be traced to within the first century of the conquests of the great American civilizations by conquistadores. Some of the early education was simply local Spanish priests and nuns who taught Indigenous peoples Spanish, Catholicism, and skills necessary to support the mission (and sometimes expansion). One of the earliest formal Catholic schools in the Americas was founded in St. Augustine in 1606 by Franciscan monks (McDonald, 2020). Catholic education continued to be a preferred method of educating the citizenry following the secession of the New World from the chains of Europe. Much of the history of Catholic education in the United States follows the struggles of Latinx families in the Southwestern part of the United States.

As the United States slowly became the nation we recognize today, Latinx peoples faced discrimination in many forms to include education. Early on, Catholic

education played a central role in the history of the Republic of México and, eventually, in the history of the Republic of Texas. Slowly, as Protestant Anglo settlers moved West, conflict began with Latinx families. As the United States became a unified nation, public education was used to anglicize the Catholic, Spanish-speaking people within the United States (at this time mostly in the Southwest). An example of these policies included schools in places like Texas which were denied funds unless the English language was principally taught. Similar forms of antagonism were executed by Protestant Anglo settlers against the Latinx population. This discrimination in public schools led to a continued increase in Catholic school enrollment.

The importance of Catholic education continued through the late 1800s and into World War I. Catholic "colleges" sprung up in many areas around the country. These "colleges" at first began as secondary academies meant to prepare local students for traditional universities. A Georgia example of these early colleges was Benedictine College ("BC"), now known as Benedictine Military School, built by Benedictine monks in the city of Savannah, Georgia in 1902. Other examples of these Catholic colleges sprung up all around the American Southwest. MacDonald (2020) noted, "These schools represented a smooth continuity with the Spanish language, culture (sex segregation, for example), and religion distinct from the public universities emerging during this era" (para 22).

From 1900 to 1950, Catholics had increased within the United States by about 260% (Ryan, 2019). It was during this time that Latinx families continued to face discrimination in public education as the pseudo-science eugenics movement picked up steam and deficit thinking took hold within the United States regarding Latinx students.

Richard Valencia (1997) very effectively demonstrated how long-standing deficit thinking among White America has historically blamed the Latinx population for America's structural problems in schools, which has led to such disparate outcomes. "American" antagonism toward the Latinx population eventually got so bad that the United States government passed an act to repatriate Americans of Latinx heritage back to México during the Great Depression (McDonald, 2020). Essentially, "White parents, in particular, were determined to keep 'Mexican' children out of their 'American' schools" (McDonald, 2020). Stuck because of America's binary race struggle, Latinx families found themselves often outside of the legal system leaving Catholic education as the most desirable alternative.

Through World War I, even among those families who were afforded access to an appropriate education, Latinx college students faced challenges to accessing state universities, so they often attended private Catholic Colleges (MacDonald, 2020). Following World War II, when Latinx soldiers were integrated into the United States military, the Latinx community increased their challenges to government supported discrimination largely through grassroots community efforts. A significant victory occurred following a legal challenge to segregation occurring in California and Texas schools. Although school segregation was struck down in 1954, following the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, the Latinx community continued to face poor educational outcomes. Through the 1960s, most famously with the Chicano student demonstrations in East Los Angeles, the Latinx community fought for their education. Although demonstrations may no longer be occurring, the struggle for educational equality has continued through today. Unfortunately, for Latinx families seeking educational

opportunity, Catholic education took a major hit leading into the 21st century as enrollment dropped significantly. This led to many Catholic school closures just as the Latinx community began to take over as a significant percentage of the Catholic population.

Early in Catholic education, thanks largely to the high number of clergy, tuition remained very affordable. With decreasing numbers of men and women joining the priesthood today, tuition is quickly increasing as lay people take over form the clergy. This departure from what was a norm, affordable Catholic education, has impacted Latinx families. Today, increasing tuition remains a major challenge to Latinx families (Fraga, 2016; Ospino and Weitzel-O'Neill, 2016; Scanlan & Zehrbach, 2010; Suhy, 2012;). Attempting to tackle the disparity between the percentage of Latinx Catholics in the United States and the corresponding Catholic school enrollment, the University of Notre Dame has launched the Catholic School Advantage Program. This program, under the University's umbrella of the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) was created to increase Latinx enrollment in Catholic schools (Corpora & Fraga, 2016). Today, Catholic schools across the country understand that if they desire to grow, that growth is most likely to come from the Latinx community.

### *History of Private School Choice in the United States*

Today, Milwaukee's voucher program is the most recognizable school choice program in the United States. School choice as a public policy was long in the making. To understand the history of school choice, and specifically the voucher movement in the United States, one has to look much further than Milwaukee's modern-day voucher program. As an educational philosophy, what we would recognize as school vouchers

has a long history dating back to the birth of the United States of America. Enlightenment philosophers such as Adam Smith, Thomas Paine, and John Stuart Mill are best known for their thoughts which helped shape the foundations of American government. Less known are their thoughts on education.

Practically, political representatives have proposed what we would classify as voucher-like programs throughout the history of the United States. In the following sections, I provide a general overview of the philosophical underpinnings of school vouchers and how this philosophy has grown into the educational reform effort that serves as the background of this study. To those of us in the 21st century, the school choice movement, powered in large part by school vouchers, may seem like a relatively recent reform, but it was the classical liberal thinkers that initially proposed state funding of private school education (albeit with different societal expectations of the state and what we would recognize as public education today). Although the seeds of school choice may have been sowed by well-known Enlightenment philosophers, it was lesser-known 20th century thinkers that harvested the fruit.

**The Evolution of the School Choice Philosophy**

**Adam Smith.** Today's neoliberal concept of government-supported vouchers in its nascence dates back to the Enlightenment philosophe, Adam Smith. Smith is most well-known for his 1776 book, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, also called *The Wealth of Nations*. The ideas contained in *The Wealth of Nations* led to what is commonly known as laissez-faire economics. This philosophy has led to the free-market (capitalistic) society that we recognize today. Lesser known is

Smith's opinion on education developed upon what he saw as Scotland's educational transformation (Book V).

Smith, educated at both England's prestigious Oxford University and Scotland's Glasgow, discussed what he observed as the differences between Scotland's system of education and that of England. Smith was a proponent of compulsory education for the masses. Smith argued for the State to pay for the building of schools, but to leave the forms of payment to school masters (and teachers) to private payments from families (1776, p. 480). For high-performing students from low socio-economic backgrounds, Smith even asserted that the public could give small premiums (1776, p. 480). Acknowledging the benefits of an educated citizenry to a nation as a whole, Smith went one step further in asserting that the cost for education and religious instruction should be offset by the contributions of the whole society (1776, p. 502). Smith's assertion of the state's responsibility to educate its citizenry and provide a portion of the economic means to subsidize one's education, is eerily similar to the mixture of state and private education created by neoliberal policies.

**Thomas Paine.** Yet another philosopher who followed Adam Smith's vein of thinking was Thomas Paine. Paine is most well-known for his immense contribution to the American Revolution, through his work, *Common Sense/Addressed to the Inhabitants of America* (1776). Paine soon returned to England on the eve of the outbreak of the French Revolution. Seeing a link between America's overthrow of the hegemony of Great Britain and the French people's revolution against absolute Monarchy, Paine penned *The Rights of Man* (1791). In Paine's, *The Rights of Man,* another Enlightenment work with a seemingly political focus, he too addresses education. Paine concurs with

Smith's sentiments insisting, "A nation under a well-regulated government, should permit none to remain uninstructed" (1791, p. 173). After opining on the government's requirement to provide education to its citizenry, Paine went a step further proposing that families should be provided funds for the expense of schooling (1791).

**Thomas Jefferson and William Seward.** Within the United States, it was Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence and third President of the United States, who proposed a bill establishing the first statewide schools in Virginia. Much like Adam Smith, Jefferson sought to use the state to set up the schools, yet tuition paid by the family served as the means of supporting the school ("79. A bill for the more general diffusion of knowledge, 18 June 1779," 1779). Like many of today's school choice proposals, Jefferson, the then Virginia Governor, included means-testing measures leading to government vouchers to support the education of lower socioeconomic families' children. For Jefferson, nevertheless, this endeavor was a failure since the Virginia Assembly never passed the measure.

Fast forward another half-century and it was William Seward, Governor of New York, who argued for a similar, voucher-like program for his state in 1840. New York was grappling with Nativist aggression against the ever-growing Irish population. The Irish population overwhelmingly supported Democrat candidates, while the protestant American population sought to use the Whig party to attack the Irish way of life. Seward, a Whig, sought to gain the Irish support by guaranteeing equal rights to Irish immigrants, including the establishment of schools "with free toleration of their peculiar creeds" (Pratt, 1961, p. 353). This was a shock to the Protestant-dominated party as it was only in 1825 that the City of New York declared only the Protestant-dominated Public School

Society schools and non-denominational schools were to receive public funds. Although like Jefferson, Seward's proposal failed, it continued a strain of thinking that government subsidies of private, religious-based education were acceptable.

**John Stewart Mill**. Another classic liberal thinker, John Steward Mill wrote an essay titled, *On Liberty* (1859), which addressed social liberty in relation to "the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual" (p. 1). Like Adam Smith and Thomas Paine, the English philosophers before him, Mill believed in the societal benefits of compulsory education and government provided subsidies to support it. Mill believed by requiring education that the government could withdraw itself from providing it:

> If the government would make up its mind to *require* for every child a good education, it might save itself the trouble of *providing* one. It might leave to parents to obtain the education where and how they pleased, and content itself with helping to pay the school fees of the poorer classes of children and defraying the entire school expenses of those who have no one else to pay for them. (Mill, 1859, p. 89)

Mill's strong support of the educational marketplace and government provided subsidies (or vouchers) to enable the success of this market continued this thread of thinking well into the 19th century. Within a decade of Mill's *On Liberty*, the United States first publicly supported voucher program began.

**Milton Friedman**. The most powerful voice in support of school choice in the 20th century was Milton Friedman (Viteritti, 2010). Friedman was a well-known professor at the University of Chicago. He became a leader of the Chicago school of

economics, which is essentially neoliberalism where the free market is extolled as the solution for many problems with minimal government interference. Friedman's economic and political philosophies were enticing to Americans who were disenchanted with Keynesian government policies enacted during the first half of the 20th century. As the conservative wave grew, so did Friedman's popularity outside of academic circles. Friedman's popularity among conservatives resulted in his work with Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign and formal appointment as an advisor to U.S. President Ronald Reagan. A demonstration of Friedman's intellectual prowess led to his selection by economics professors across the United States as the second most favorite economist of the 20th century (Davis, Figgins, Hedengren, & Klein, 2011, pp. 126-146). Freidman was also awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 1976.

Friedman published many works covering topics from taxes, the war on drugs, and conscription, among others. Although his thoughts on these topics likely played a role in U.S. policy discussions, it was his thoughts on school vouchers (or school choice) that are pertinent to this study. Friedman's work for educational choice continues today through his foundation, originally called the Freidman Foundation for Educational Choice, later renamed EdChoice (Sullivan, 2016).

In 1955, Friedman published an article called *The Role of Government in Education*. Akin to Adam Smith's (1776) critique of the British government's intervention in causing a subpar education, Friedman criticized the monopolized reality of the United States educational system. Friedman's proposed solution was a universal system of vouchers that would be made available to all families, regardless of income and minimal government oversight. The value of the voucher would be based upon the per

pupil cost paid by the state. Parents could, in addition, use their family income to purchase additional or more costly educational services. Once the parent chose their child(ren)'s school, the government would pay the school directly. Friedman asserted that the competitive free-market forces spurred by a national voucher program would close low-performing schools.

Friedman's voice and influence in American politics led to school choice becoming the educational policy it is today. The problem for school choice proponents, in addition to the difficulty of upending the well-ingrained history of government supported public schools, was that the most recognizable school choice programs of the 1950s were in Southern States, as the elected politicians sought to evade the United States Supreme Court ruling against segregation in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (1954). This predicament will be further explored in the history of school choice in Georgia.

Friedman made note of the southern vouchers problem in his 1955 essay, as a footnote, but it was 1960s progressives who surprisingly also joined in support of school vouchers (Levin, 2013). Writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, Harvard sociologist, Christopher Jencks, argued that the public inner-city schools had failed Black students (Jencks, 1968). Progressive voucher proponents largely sympathized with movements toward community control and free schools (Forman, 2005). Concurring, Friedman emphasized that his school voucher proposal would help in moderating racial conflict (Friedman, 1973). This merging of school choice support among both sides of the American political spectrum would continue with future choice proponents.

**Coons and Sugarman**. Beginning in the 1970s Jack Coons and Steve Sugarman took up the mantle of Friedman's pro-choice argument, with an important twist: social justice. Both men began their journey while working together on a legal challenge to the equality of school financing by the state of California (*Serrano*, 1971). This twist, as will be noted in the enactments of school choice in the 1990s, is integral to understanding the arguments posed by modern school choice advocates. Where Milton Friedman argued for a purely free-market based voucher system, Coons and Sugarman (1971, 1978) took a more equity-based approach. An example of this schism in philosophy was that Friedman believed families should be able to supplement their voucher with their own private funds, while Coons and Sugarman argued that this would, in fact, continue the educational disparity by placing poorer families at a competitive disadvantage (Viteritti, 2010).

Seeking a more equitable approach, Coons and Sugarman turned the school choice mantle from purely economics to a social justice initiative. Although Friedman may be the most publicly recognizable name, today's school choice movement should be credited to Coons and Sugarman. It is their social justice narrative that led to the proposal and adoption of the earliest voucher programs in Milwaukee (1990) and Cleveland (1995) (Viteritti, 2010). It is also their narrative that drives debates happening in state houses around the United States.

The argument is simple, which makes it appealing. Why should poor children be confined to failing schools when there are other options, and why should school choice only be available to those who come from privileged backgrounds? This is how school choice evolved from a free-market economics-based philosophical debate to being

promoted as a tool to continue along the path of *Brown v. Board of Education's* (1963) assertion of educational equality (Carl, 2011; Garcia, 2018; Gooden, Jabbar, & Torres, 2016). It is this argument that has led to the expansion of school choice initiatives. What was initially understood to be a conservative approach is now making in-roads with liberal Democrats, most especially among Black and Latinx Americans (Ruszkowski, 2020).

**Chubb and Moe**. In 1990, John Chubb and Terry Moe, then both senior fellows at the Brookings institute, published *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*. Described as a "landmark book" by Vitteritti (2010), Chubb and Moe asserted that the public school bureaucracy was incapable of significant educational reform and thus must be scrapped. "We believe existing institutions cannot solve the problem, because they *are the* problem – and that the key to better schools is institutional reform" (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 3). Their solution: a new public education, built around competition through school choice.

Following the philosophical thread of Adam Smith (1776) and Milton Friedman (1955), as well as the political statement of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), Chubb and Moe asserted that the democratic nature of public schooling led to powerful factions that simply protected the educational status quo (identified were teachers' unions, professional organizations, and others). The only solution was more efficient educational models. To demonstrate this efficiency, Chubb and Moe compared private schooling models with their public schooling counterparts. From the autonomy of a principal to truly lead a school (versus the bureaucratic, "lower-level manager" public school principal, p. 56) to the autonomy to make curriculum and instructional decisions, Chubb

and Moe outlined their interpretation of effective schools. Why were private schools outperforming public schools, not because they are private, but because private schools operated in a different institutional setting "distinguished by the basic features of markets – decentralization, competition, and choice…" (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 67). Today's other school choice endeavor, charter schools, could be considered mirror reflections of what Chubb and Moe (1990) proposed whereby a publicly funded school exchanges flexibility for increased accountability to parents and the market.

*The Evolution of Voucher Programs in the United States*

There are two essential concepts to understand before moving to the execution of school choice in the United States. The first is how to define a school voucher program. The second is the political deliberations revolving around government support of religious organizations, which surrounds the United States Bill of Rights and state constitutional amendments. Within both concepts, there are gray areas that have come about as the country has progressed in its attempts at providing school choice. To best understand the contexts of this study, a historical and political understanding is necessary. The history of school choice, dating back to the first philosophical mentions of public assistance for parental school choice, is necessary, as is the evolution of the concept.

**What is a voucher**? The definition of a voucher is an important aspect to identifying a school voucher program. As will be seen in the forthcoming section, the definition of what a voucher is and is not has become blurred. Wolf (2005) defines school voucher programs as "arrangements whereby government funds enable parents to enroll their children in private schools of their choosing" (p. 422). Chubb and Moe (1990) defined it as "a system in which government would provide funding directly to

students in the form of vouchers, and students would use their vouchers to pay for education in the public or private school of their choosing" (p. 217).

The aforementioned is the blurring of what is and is not considered a school voucher program. Of note is that of all the school choice endeavors, past and present, there are no school voucher programs that reflect the universal nature envisioned by Friedman. As the Supreme Court of the United States has handed down decisions, school choice advocates have been left to finetune the mechanisms that enable students to achieve the same ends, financial assistance to enable school choice. The legislative programs executed within some states, such as Georgia, essentially look, sound, and operate like school voucher programs; however, by a technicality, they are not.

**United States Constitutional Arguments**. The establishment clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof…" (U.S. Const. amend I). School choice opponents argue that the clause prohibits the United States government from favoring a state-sponsored church through direct or indirect means, such as funding. By providing direct funding for students to enroll in private, religious institutions, the government is sponsoring a religious institution. School choice proponents assert that in providing financial assistance such payments do not equate to government sponsorship of religion as the same funds can be used at a non-religious school of choice.

This funding argument is central to the school choice debate over school voucher programs. School voucher programs, such as the one envisioned by Milton Friedman (1955), were direct payments of public money by the government to religious schools.

This constitutional question would have to be answered by the United States Supreme Court. Over time, the challenges that came before the Court shaped the school choice programs in existence today. Georgia's school choice program that the Latinx parents are navigating is a direct result of these decisions, as well as the and the adjustments that school choice proponents have made in light of the Court's decisions.

**Politics and Blaine Amendments.** Much of the voucher debate surrounding school choice is centered around what are known as Blaine Amendments. These amendments are named after a congressperson from the late 19th century named James G. Blaine, who proposed a federal constitutional amendment to ban funding of religious schools. Although the federal constitutional amendment failed, many states enacted their own versions within state constitutions. The first state to pass a Blaine amendment was New York, in 1894. The last of the Blaine Amendments was added in the early 20th century, bringing the total number of states which have this amendment to thirty-five (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2007, p. 5). The debate over Blaine Amendments is unique in that there is a philosophical disagreement over whether states should provide financial resources to religious organizations, and then there is a historical debate surrounding the impetus of the Blaine Amendments.

School choice proponents cite the American political landscape of the late 1800s, which was staunchly nativist and anti-Catholic (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2007). Some scholars have even gone as far as asserting that it was the Ku Klux Klan that were "principle backers" of Blaine Amendments when the organization realized the propositions could be used against Black citizens, Catholics, and Jews (Sutton & King, 2011; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2007, p. 38). School choice proponents assert

that these "Blaine Amendments" violate the first amendment (Free Exercise) and fourteenth amendment (Equal Protections clause).

School choice opponents argue these no-funding provisions as essential to the division between Church and State as envisioned by the Founding Fathers (Goldenziel, 2005). By pointing to other states, such as Vermont, which is nearly identical to the original enacted in 1777, Goldenziel (2005) asserted that no-funding provisions are often philosophical and not tied to nativist undercurrents.

The Supreme Court of the United States has been careful not to wade into historical interpretation. Chief Justice Rehnquist, delivering the majority opinion of a 2004 Supreme Court case *Locke v. Davey* stated, "the Blaine Amendment's history is simply not before us" (p. 10). Although the Court was cautious to act as the historical referees and sought to delegate that responsibility to historians, as we have progressed into the 21st century, the Court has begun to intervene in cases dealing with school choice initiatives. A few highlighted cases will demonstrate the current direction of today's United States Supreme Court.

**America's earliest voucher programs.** The earliest remnant of a voucher program in the United States can be found in Vermont and Maine. What was then called "town tuitioning" began in Vermont in 1869 and in Maine in 1873. The programs were created to ensure that even those children living in rural areas of the state, where there was no public school, were able to procure an education (Garnett, 1999; Hammons, 2002). In this system, parents could send their children to another public school or a private school in other areas of the state, or even outside the state, as long as the parents resided in a town that pays the cost of educating that student.

The impetus behind this early voucher-like program was, in Maine and Vermont, it was found to be cheaper to send students off to well-established private schools rather than to pay to build local public schools (Hammons, 2002). Cost, much like the ongoing argument of Georgia political representatives, was the driving factor behind the program. Although the cost savings to the local districts were enticing, the question pertaining to how government subsidies fell within the Establishment Clause in the U.S. Constitution continued to be a topic of debate, and eventually, legal decisions. It was in 1981 that the Supreme Courts of Vermont ruled that using these public funds to send children to private, religious schools was unconstitutional (Swart v. South Burlington Town School District, 122 Vt. 177, 1981). In that same year, Maine's legislature passed a statute reflecting a similar conclusion. As was seen with William Seward's voucher proposal, as well as the programs established in Vermont and Maine, politics and the question of a wall of separation between Church and State continued to push the United States' enactment of similar voucher proposals.

**Federal support of vouchers**. Educational vouchers were first explored under President Johnson's administration as part of his Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) (Carl, 2011). During Johnson's administration, the OEO was focused on the War on Poverty. As the OEC coordinated a myriad of activities in cities across the United States, compensatory school vouchers garnered the attention of staffers interested in education. Compensatory school vouchers enabled families to select their child's school within their districts (instead of being districted to a specific school). The OEO offered funding for districts interested in experimenting with vouchers, but none accepted.

During the Nixon administration, a republican congressperson from the Chicago suburbs, Donald Rumsfeld, was selected to run the OEO. Although Rumsfeld and his assistant, Richard Cheney, worked to oppose many of the War on Poverty measures, one measure they did support was free-market-based educational vouchers. While several cities accepted planning funds from the OEO and one district executed it, the OEO was in conservatives' crosshairs for representing President Johnson's Great Society endeavor, President Nixon dismantled the office. School voucher policy advocates made their way to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW). Just as OEO was being dismantled, New Hampshire secured funding for a market-based voucher (which was in addition to the "town tuitioning" programs discussed earlier). However, following a series of court decisions (including the exclusion of parochial schools), public discourse, and the disgraced Nixon and Ford administrations, the voucher experiment failed to ever take off. A lesson learned by school choice advocates: take the decision-making power away from the local school boards or voters.

Vouchers were not again considered until President Ronald Reagan took office. Reagan proposed school vouchers twice; the first in 1983, the proposal died in Congress before even coming to a vote; the second in 1985, Reagan proposed shifting funds from Title I by giving low-income parents a $600 voucher toward tuition at the school of their choice (Pear, 1985). Then Secretary of Education, William J. Bennett, sought to sell the program as the Reagan Administration took up the plight of the poor. This too failed as Republican lawmakers were worried about its impact on the public schools. Fortunately for Republicans, the incumbent party won the presidency, but the failure of school vouchers remained the same.

President George H.W. Bush attempted to execute a legislative effort in support of federal vouchers through his "G.I. Bill for children." The proposal was to send $1,000 to children of low and middle-income families to attend the school of their choice (public, private, or religious). It was based upon the early perceived success of the Milwaukee program. Bush's attempt was too late into his presidency as he proposed the measure in the summer of 1992, just before losing the election to Governor Bill Clinton.

The next federal effort for expanded vouchers came under the next Republican President, George W. Bush. This time, Republicans were successful. On January 23, 2004, President Bush signed the DC School Choice Initiative, which was the first federally funded K-12 scholarship program in the country. The program gave tuition scholarships worth up to $7,500 to families with annual household incomes below 185% of the poverty level who lived within the District of Columbia. Republicans finally found success and were sure to continue down this path as their party took power in the future.

Although President Barrack Obama also adopted neoliberal school philosophies by encouraging compensatory school choice in the form of expanded charter schools (Eastman, Anderson, & Boyles, 2017; White, 2009), Friedman-like school choice became one of the many centerpieces under President Donald Trump, and then Educational Secretary Betsy Devos. Trump, echoing the social justice sentiments of school choice, argued that it was the "civil rights statement of the year" (Whistle, 2020). Much like George H.W. Bush, it was too little too late. Before the Trump Administration could gain enough political fervor for the topic, he was defeated by Joe Biden.

**The case of Milwaukee.** Milwaukee has perhaps the best-known school voucher program in the country. Implemented in 1991, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program

(MPCP) is the longest running such program in the United States. The program provides state funding for low-income students to attend private schools within the City of Milwaukee. Low-income, as of 2014, meant students of parents who make below $70,000 (Joseph, Vélez, & Antrop-Gonázlez, 2017). Because of its longevity, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program has been the subject of the most research and has provided the best longitudinal data (Garcia, 2018).

*Zelman v. Simmons-Harris (2002)*

In 2002, the United States Supreme Court took up a case regarding the participation of religious schools in Cleveland, Ohio's school voucher program. Cleveland's program offered all students residing in underperforming school districts a choice of attending a public school of their choice or to attend a private school, with financial aid based upon need. The majority opinion, in a 5-4 decision, was that the participation of these religious schools did not violate the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution.

> In sum, the Ohio program is entirely neutral with respect to religion. It provides benefits directly to a wide spectrum of individuals, defined only by financial need and residence in a particular school district. It permits such individuals to exercise genuine choice among options public and private, secular and religious. The program is therefore a program of true private choice. In keeping with an unbroken line of decisions rejecting challenges to similar programs, we hold that the program does not offend the Establishment Clause. (*Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, 2002, p. 21)

The majority's opinion was that as long as the government does not provide aid directly to religious schools and, instead, the aid provided is due to the parents' choices: then it is permissible. The *Zelman* decision was important for two reasons: first, the Court was deferential to parents' right to choose in their reasoning while evaluating Cleveland's school choice program; secondly, the Court left open the question of the constitutionality of voucher programs in the 37 states that had Blaine Amendments. It was accepted, at that moment, that *Zelman* did not compel states that had Blaine amendments to accept voucher programs (Lantta, 2004). It was understood that Blaine Amendments were next on the list of challenges to be posed by school voucher proponents, but school choice opponents were sure that federal challenges to Blaine were likely to fail, leaving school choice advocates to focus on crafting voucher programs to skirt existing Blaine amendments. They were right. While only five voucher programs were established before *Zelman*, seven programs were enacted within the first five years following *Zelman* (Wolf, 2005).

**Washington DC.** Washington D.C.'s voucher program serves as another notable example of school choice expansion. In 2004, the U.S. Congress approved a voucher program for Washington, D.C., which stands as the only federally supported voucher program. Like Milwaukee, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship sought to serve disadvantaged students who lived in D.C. Wolfe, Gutmann, Eissa, and Puma (2005) found that the average family income of the voucher recipients was $18,652 (p. 49).

*Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue (2020)*

In 2015, the Montana legislature passed a tax-credit scholarship program, akin to Georgia's. Immediately, the Montana Department of Revenue prohibited using the funds

at religious schools citing their Blaine amendment (adopted in 1889). Kendra Espinoza and other low-income mothers filed suit, challenging the Montana Department of Revenue's rule against the use of funds at religious institutions. The case eventually made its way to the United States Supreme Court, where the plaintiffs argued that Montana's Department of Revenue violated the Religion Clauses and the Equal Protection Clause of the federal constitution. In a 5-4 decision, the United States Supreme Court found that:

> The Montana Constitution's 'no-aid' provision to a state program providing tuition assistance to parents who send their children to private schools discriminated against religious schools and the families whose children attend or hope to attend them in violation of the Federal Constitution's Free Exercise Clause. (*Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*, 2020)

Chief Justice John Roberts authored the majority opinion. In it, he asserted "that the Free Exercise Clause 'protects religious observers against unequal treatment' and against 'laws that impose special disabilities on the basis of religious status" (Oyez, 2020, para 5). The Court's majority opinion has now addressed a lasting question about the federal constitutionality of tax-credit scholarship programs, like Georgia's. As could be expected, the State of South Carolina is now following suit with their own tax-credit scholarship program (Gleason, 2022).

**Modern voucher-like school choice programs**. Two forms of school choice programs have been created to avoid constitutional legal challenges: (1) educational savings accounts (ESAs); and (2) tax-credit scholarships. In addition to having built in support by conservative, neoliberal politicians, these programs have been sold to state

legislators as a net cost savings to the state (thus increasing the likelihood of bipartisan support). Many of the programs have maximum award amounts which are notably below the per pupil cost to educate public school students. Both programs serve a growing number of students nationwide, but for the purposes of this study, the focus will be on tax credit scholarship, which is the form of school choice program the elected representatives of the state of Georgia enacted.

In 1997, before the decision in *Zelman v. Simmons* (2002) was handed down, Arizona legislators were unsure of the legality of school voucher programs. To avoid this potential issue, the legislators turned to a non-traditional route: tax credit scholarship programs. With tax-credit scholarship programs, states allow their citizens and/or corporations to reallocate some of their state tax burden by providing state income tax credits up to a specified dollar amount. These individuals, families, or corporations then select a non-profit scholarship granting organization to which they donate their money. The scholarship granting organization then pays the school on behalf of students who meet the state's criteria for award.

Critics like Welner (2008) described this form of school choice program as "kissing cousins of voucher systems" and thus titled tax-credit scholarship programs as "neovouchers" (p. 6). Some school choice opponents have described tax credit scholarship programs as legal money laundering (Nelson et al., 2021). School choice proponents disagree. This structure ensures that taxpayer money never passes through the hands of the state, thus, according to school choice proponents, the state is not providing direct payments to religious schools (avoiding any Blaine Amendment or first amendment legal challenges). In 1997, Arizona became the first state to adopt a tax

credit scholarship program to promote school choice. Today, there are 18 states that have tax-credit scholarship programs (EdChoice, 2019; Suitts 2011).

### *Georgia's School Choice Movement*

**The troubling past of Georgia's venture into school choice**. Georgia's school choice movement and non-dominant peoples have been intertwined since the beginning. Although the auspices for today's school choice movement in Georgia cites the inclusivity of marginalized communities, Georgia's school choice movement dates back to the United States' historical battles over racial segregation. As demonstrated by Kruse (2005) and Carl (2011), although the enlightened market-based philosophies may be invoked as the grounds which school choice was founded upon, there is an ugly reality to school choice which has white supremacist roots (Carl, 2011; Kruse, 2005).

A primary goal of Latinx critical race theory is to expose the systemic factors that have built much of the societal structures that we know today (García & Guerra, 2004). The school choice movements across the South were initially based significantly on racist notions fueled by pseudoscience. This form of deficit thinking has been defined significantly by Valencia (1997, 2010). Today, much of the independent school community is still grappling with the overwhelming beginnings of many private, independent schools, across the United States, as exclusionary societal institutions.

The National Association of Independent Schools' (NAIS) is the largest association of independent schools within the United States. In the winter 2021 magazine, the focus was on race. The opening note by Andi Gabrick, editor of the Independent School Magazine, began her editorial with what she described as a starting point by stating "our schools were designed to be exclusionary" (2021, p. 6). These

schools were not created for members of the non-dominant group, in fact, in the case of many private schools, especially in the American South, they were created to escape non-dominant groups (Carl, 2011; Kruse, 2005). In Georgia, the location of this research study, it is common to find private schools with founding dates in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s.

Following the United States Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (1954), the first school voucher programs in the South came about as a method to combat the federal government's enforcement of desegregation (Carl, 2011). In 1951, Georgia pioneered for the rest of the South these school vouchers called "tuition grants" (Carl, 2011). The understood purpose, as was evident in the amending of the state constitution, was to maintain racially segregated schools by paying for White students to attend private, segregated schools (Carl, 2011). Georgia-elected representatives spent a great deal of effort to thwart desegregation, even coming up with what was called the "private-school plan." In 1953, a full year before *Brown*, a constitutional amendment was passed to give the Georgia General Assembly the power to privatize the state's public school system (Kruse, 2005). Milton Friedman acknowledged this in a footnote in his 1955 version of *The Role of Government in Education* and removed it when he added the essay as a chapter to his 1962 book, *Capitalism and Freedom*. White Georgians continued their desire to maintain what they deemed freedom of association, which is the right to choose whom one associates with or does not associate with (Kruse, 2005). As tuition grants and the private-school plan fell to court rulings, Southern White Americans had one last refuge: to establish segregated "academies," which were independent private schools meant as one last dying measure in support of White flight (Kruse, 2005).

In the fall of 1959, private schools in Atlanta reported record numbers of requests for admission (Kruse, 2005, p. 169). As White citizens clamored for admittance to these segregation academies, even the Ku Klux Klan announced in 1960 that it would start a school in Atlanta. The most pressing challenge was how to tap into state funds to help White families of all socioeconomic status afford private schooling. Initially, the hope was a legislation effort, similar to Virginia, that would allow Georgians to allocate money to private schools in lieu of paying their state income tax (Kruse, 2005). The scheme was to establish non-sectarian segregation academies, which would apply for non-profit status and seek state funding. This failed as legislators, worried about the cost to the state, hesitated to go down this road. Once again, it took a court decision, this time in favor of segregation, to cause action.

In 1962, a White family pressed the state to disperse the funds promised in Georgia's tuition grant legislation. A judge ruled that the law was clear, and as long as the student attended a non-sectarian school, they were to be awarded financial assistance. Tuition grants quickly increased in quantity, but interestingly the Atlanta Constitution reported "that 83 percent of the recipients had been enrolled in private schools well before the desegregation struggle" (Kruse, 2005, p. 171). The message was clear: tuition grants were acting as a handout to upper-class White parents, and this soured legislative support and, by 1963, no tuition grants were awarded throughout the state (Kruse, 2005, p. 171). Because Georgia legislators stipulated those funds were only allowed at non-sectarian schools, as the tuition grant movement died, so did most of the segregation academies.

Desegregation of all public schools was inevitable, which left more well-established private schools to grapple with their own problems with segregation. Due to White flight, it is not feasible to document the desegregation effort of a significant quantity of private schools. To convolute the founding of these White flight schools, some private schools have combined with other schools and cherry picked the best founding dates to mask their original purpose. Quite possibly the most famous struggle with desegregation is the Lovett School in Atlanta, which denied the son of Martin Luther King, Jr. The fallout became known as the "Lovett Crisis" (Kruse, 2005). One aspect of private school desegregation that is well documented around the South is that Catholic schools were quick to correct the tragedy of segregation, and this appears to have been the case in Georgia (Carl, 2011; Kruse, 2005). For the better part of the latter half of the 20th century, Georgia elected officials shifted their focus to support of public schooling and to grapple with desegregation.

**School choice takes hold, again, in Georgia**. It would be another 30 years before school choice began to again percolate in Georgia as a public policy. Georgia's elected representatives passed legislation allowing public charter schools to begin operating in 1993. As other states, such as Arizona, moved forward with additional school choice programs, Georgia's elected officials observed the course of the U.S. Supreme Court rulings. It was not until 2007 that Georgia's elected representatives were confident enough to begin discussing a universal school choice program, funded through tax credits.

In 2008, Georgia state representative David Casas (R-Lilburn), a high school social science teacher, introduced House Bill (HB) 1133, which aimed to use tax credit

scholarships as the mechanism to achieve school choice. During the same legislative session, senator Johnson (R-Savannah) introduced Senate Bill (SB) 458, which sought to provide a traditional voucher to students within public schools that had lost their accreditation or had received a "needs improvement" rating. As both bills made it through the General Assembly, the proposed legislations were heralded in the newspapers for attempting to address "the civil rights issue of the 21st century" (O'Brien, 2008). Although addressing the plight of the minority community and those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder was a frequent pro-school choice assertion, the current data does not demonstrate that to be the case. The self-reported numbers of GOAL Scholarship Program Inc., the largest student scholarship organization (SSO) in Georgia, demonstrate that non-dominant students are awarded the scholarship at rates analogous to the percentages of each population present in Georgia (Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program, Inc., 2020). Therefore, in an educational system which has overwhelmingly benefitted the majority group and those of economic means that this legislative program may not be addressing the plight of those with the most need.

The assistance given to minority students appears to be more of an ancillary benefit of the legislation rather than the intended purpose (an important delineation). A critical researcher has to wonder if, in light of the federal government's reoccurring reminder of the failure of public schools, the recent emergence of school choice legislation came about because the failure of public schools which has plagued students of color for so long (Valencia, 1997), is now being realized by those within the dominant group. This notion would fit with Bell's (1980) theory of interest convergence where he asserts that White Americans will only seek change (that happens to help those of non-

dominant backgrounds) when it is in their economic and political interests. In the case of school choice, Bell's theory should be expanded to include familial interests.

The economics-based argument made to increase political support of HB 1133 has remained true. The state of Georgia has saved money by enacting this legislation. As the elected representatives were debating this legislation, The Friedman Foundation commissioned a study, which demonstrated that by enacting HB 1133 Georgia districts would save $94 million dollars and the state government would save $6 million (Sheinin, 2008). The state of Georgia's per pupil expenditure rate for 2019 was $9,905 (United States Department of Education, 2020). The average GOAL Scholarship award, since the inception, is $4,027 (Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program, Inc., 2020). This demonstration of state savings has led to an increase in support across both aisles over the years.

Ultimately HB 1133, Georgia's Qualified Education Expense (QEE) Tax Credit, passed the General Assembly, by a vote of 92 to 73, and was signed into law by then Georgia Governor Sonny Purdue. This legislation allowed Georgia citizens and corporations to shift a portion of their tax obligation away from the Georgia Department of Revenue and dictate that money be sent to the private school of their choice through a not-for-profit student scholarship organization (SSO). The initial annual cap on allowable claimed tax credits was set at $50 million. The semantics of a tax credit versus a tax deduction is important. Tax credits are more beneficial than tax deductions. Tax credits reduce the individual/corporation's taxes dollar for dollar, while tax deductions simply reduce the taxable income upon which taxes are calculated. The funds were to be awarded from the SSO directly to the school on behalf of students who were seeking

admittance to the private school but were currently enrolled in a Georgia public school. Recipient students were to use their scholarships to attend the private K-12 schools of their parents' choice (Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program, Inc., 2021a).

**GOAL Scholarship Program, Inc.** GOAL Scholarship Program, Inc. was the first SSO to be recognized by the Georgia Department of Education. Today, GOAL Scholarship Program, Inc. maintains the largest market share of any SSO. Today there are 158 K-12 private schools that participate in the Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program (Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program, Inc., 2021b). All participants in this study have received the GOAL scholarship to move their child from their districted public school to their selected private school. SSOs are an essential component to the execution and legality of Georgia's school choice program. The SSO is also essential to the experiences that parent(s) have as they navigate school choice in Georgia.

To better understand how the process works from the taxpayer perspective, GOAL has outlined the process:

1) GOAL submits taxpayer's request for a tax credit to the Department of Revenue (DOR):
2) Taxpayer receives a DOR approval letter within 30 days after GOAL submits the application, indicating the amount for which he or she is approved and the deadline for making the payment to GOAL
3) GOAL also receives notice of taxpayer's DOR approval, and GOAL will email taxpayer detailed instructions regarding payment deadline and options
4) When notified of DOR approval, taxpayers must submit payment to GOAL before his or her 60-day payment deadline

5) GOAL will send taxpayer Form IT-QEE-SS01 (tax receipt) for claiming the credit on his or her Georgia income tax return
6) When taxpayer files their taxes, he or she will take 100% Georgia income tax credit

For 2021, a married couple filing a joint return could redirect up to $2,500 of their income tax payments to GOAL. A married couple filing separately could each redirect up to $1,250. A single individual could redirect up to $1,000. An individual who is a member of a limited liability company (LLC), shareholder of an "S" corporation, or partner in a partnership (pass-through entities) could file for a tax credit up to $10,000, so long as they have paid Georgia income tax in that amount on their share of taxable income from the pass-through entity. "C" corporations (such as AFLAC, Coca-Cola, and Delta), they could file for up to 75% of their annual Georgia income tax liability. GOAL's reported data shows as of November 2020, "C" corporations brought in a total of $36,313,795. Of those contributions, 54% came from individuals, 37% came from owners of pass-through businesses, and 9% came from corporations (Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program, Inc., 2021a).

For the family to receive financial aid through the GOAL scholarship, the only consistency is the recommendation to parents to inquire with the chosen participating school's admissions department. The parent then works directly with the participating school to file for financial assistance. Each participating school is left to implement their own GOAL Scholarship application process. In all cases, the school submits to GOAL what they believe is the financial need of the family. GOAL either agrees with that assessment or holds up the process to determine why the request may exceed GOAL

Scholarship's guidelines. If all parties agree, once the family enrolls, GOAL sends the funds, electronically, to the school on behalf of the student.

**Implementation since inception.** Since 2008, due to increasing participation in the program, the day on which the cap is reached has occurred increasingly earlier and earlier. This exhaustion of the cap eventually resulted in capped funds being exhausted within hours of the first day of each new year. Calls to increase the cap persisted as school choice proponents claimed that demand was obviously outpacing the supply of tax credits. Citing school websites selling the QEE tax credit as a scheme to make money, critics asserted the rich elite were taking advantage of the broken tax system (Tagami, 2017). After failing to increase the cap in 2017, that call was answered late into the final hours of the 2018 Georgia legislative session when Georgia lawmakers passed House Bill (HB) 217. The legislation doubled the annual cap from 50 million dollars to 100 million dollars and was signed by then-Governor Nathan Deal (Kelly, 2018). The increase is predicted to have resulted in an additional 10,000 students shifting from public to private schools, causing more concerns about the increased lost state revenues (Klein, 2014). School choice proponents are now pushing for additional legislation to include what is called an automatic escalator clause, similar to Arizona's school choice program. What an automatic escalator clause does is as soon as a percentage (say 80%) of the tax credits are claimed then there is an automatic increase in the amount of tax credits available to claim by the specified percentage (say 25%). This clause would ensure that demand would never outpace the supply of tax credits available.

The enactment of this educational policy is recorded by numerous sources. What is not known is the data on the execution of this policy. Advocacy groups, such as the

Southern Education Foundation, as well as others, have asserted since the bill's original passage in 2008 that almost nothing is known relative to how these SSOs are operating, private school accountability data, or demographic information about who is using the tax-funded scholarship (Suitts, 2011; Tagami, 2017). More recently, in a report to Congress, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) stated that the Georgia Department of Education had no oversight over Georgia's tax credit scholarship program (2019).

In addition to researching the experiences of Latinx families in Georgia, this study seeks to shed light on the operations of Georgia's Qualified Education Tax Credit through an examination of the Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program, Inc. As the SSO with the largest market share in the State of Georgia, an examination of GOAL Scholarship's operations should provide fruitful. To truly understand the experiences of the growing population of Latinx parents, we must also understand the system in which we are studying their experiences.

The future of Georgia's school choice program is unclear. If Georgia's shift to a blue state, realized during the 2020 elections, continues, the school choice momentum may be paused if not completely erased. Nevertheless, school choice remains a popular topic within conservative circles. This was demonstrated when Georgia Republicans tested the waters of a traditional voucher system by asking registered Republicans on the 2020 ballot: Should Georgia lawmakers expand educational options by allowing a student's state education dollars to follow to the school that best fits their needs whether that is a public, private, magnet, charter, virtual or home school? (Downey, 2020). In addition, the extended closure of public schools caused by COVID-19 has led to

additional considerations of school choice since private schools were more likely to be executing in-person learning than public schools (Downey, 2021; Galloway, 2020). As Georgia, and the rest of the world, recovers from the collapse caused by COVID-19, the topic of how the public and private schools adapted to meet the needs of their students will undoubtedly be a hot topic.

# Chapter III

# METHODOLOGY

"One of the major principles of Critical Race Theory is that people's narratives and stories are important in truly understanding their experiences and how those experiences may represent confirmation or counter knowledge of the way society works" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 219). It was this assertion by Ladson-Billings that guided the researcher to a critical narrative as the chosen methodological approach. Within this critical narrative approach, other methodological avenues were employed to best share the experiences of Latinx parents as they navigate Georgia's school choice program. Such avenues include participant and site selection, as well as chosen ways to synthesize the data gathered from the narratives of the participants. The goal of this systematic approach is to give this community a platform to share their experiences. These experiences will better inform educators, researchers, policy advocates, and elected representatives.

In what may one day be known as the era of school choice, neoliberal policies see parents as consumers within an educational marketplace. These parents are actively seeking their child(ren)'s best educational options and making the most rational choices toward this goal. The methods that researchers undertake as they seek to add to the body of evidence within a chosen field of study are integral.

Set in Georgia, this critical narrative study sought to garner and share the experiences that Latinx families incurred as they moved their child(ren) from public

schools to private schools using financial resources provided by Georgia's Qualified Education Tax Credit program.

### *Research Questions*

Research questions are the heart of the research design process (Maxwell, 2013). Within the design process, research questions serve to help the researcher focus the study and to give the researcher guidance for how to most effectively conduct it (Maxwell, 2013). The following research questions drove the selected research design.

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do Latinx parents describe the key factors that led them to participate in Georgia's tax credit scholarship program to enroll their child(ren) in a local private school instead of the traditional public school the student would otherwise attend?
2. What are the experiences of Latinx parents in receiving and maintaining their child's voucher for initial and continued enrollment in private school?
3. On what do Latinx parents base their decision of schooling for their child's private school of choice?
4. What are the experiences of Latinx parents who successfully navigated Georgia's tax credit scholarship program once their child is enrolled in a private school?

### *Research Design*

Maxwell (2013) asserted, "A good design, one in which the components work harmoniously together, promotes efficient and successful functioning; a flawed design leads to poor operation or failure" (Chapter 1, para. 5). This study's research questions explore the experiences of Latinx parents as they navigate Georgia's tax-credit

scholarship program for their child(ren). This form of research is interpretive in nature, and the answers to the research questions are based upon the participants' experiences. Thus, a qualitative approach is most appropriate. For the research design to work harmoniously with the research questions posed, and to share the experiences of the participants most effectively, narrative inquiry was the chosen research method. Narrative inquiry has its theoretical roots in John Dewey's theory of experience (1938). Dewey's theory of experience focuses on how experiences serve to shape and transform our lives. In short, narrative inquirers study experiences (Clandinin, 2013). In this study, the experiences of Latinx parents as they navigate Georgia's tax-credit scholarship program for their child(ren) are explored. Clandinin and Connelly (1998) outline four key terms in narrative inquiry: *living, telling, retelling* and *reliving*.

Relationships are considered a central role in the work of narrative inquirers. The starting point for narrative inquiry is, in the simplest form, telling the stories of the participants. Clandinin (2013) challenges researchers who engage in narrative inquiry to move past simply telling stories and, instead, move to *retelling* and *reliving* stories. Retelling is the process of researchers who come alongside their participants as they recount their lived and told stories. *Reliving* is the change that occurs with the researcher as they internalize the stories of their participants to fit within their own experience(s). Telling stories is what narrative inquirers may seek to accomplish with their work, but it is *retelling* and *reliving* the stories that solidifies change within ourselves. *Reliving* may cause us to rethink what we once "knew" to be true, or better yet, it will cause us to change the way in which we think about experiences.

Kim (2016) described what she calls "narrative thinking" as a method of making a story out of experience (p. 275). This type of thinking is meant to be reflective, based upon the participants' recount of their experiences and the actions that led to a past outcome. Narrative inquirers are expected to take a step further and imagine what future actions are necessary to achieve future ends. Kim (2016) asserted it is narrative thinking that a narrative inquirer must understand before embarking on a narrative study.

Kim (2016) described narrative inquiry as "a way of understanding human experience through stories that, in turn, help us better understand the human phenomena and human existence" (p. 324). This quote indicates exactly what is desired to come about from this research study, which is a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of the Latinx parents. Since the participants are from a non-dominant group in the United States, with a different culture from the dominant group, their narrative is bound to be rife with cultural and social meanings, necessitating the employment of Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit). Bloom (2002) describes the power of narrative research as helping us better understand our society and as a way of resisting its hegemonic tendencies. A pioneer of critical race theory (CRT), Richard Delgado, devoted a significant amount of scholarship establishing the power of stories and counterstories or the role of "voice" as an imperative component of critical race theory (1989, 1990). Telling the stories of these families may serve as a means "for destroying mindset," "to subvert that ingroup reality," or simply "construct a new world richer" than the one we have (Delgado, 1989, pp. 2413-15). Narrative inquiry was the chosen research design because it will serve to construct a richer understanding of the experiences of a sizeable American population, whose experiences have been neglected

by previous researchers. It is through the sharing of the participants' stories that we may further evaluate how Latinx families are left to navigate school choice efforts for their child(ren). Their experiences will lead to a more enriched understanding of what may be seen as a current ingroup reality, knowingly or unknowingly implored by the elected representatives of Georgia.

### *Population*

**Latinx.** "So, what's in a name?" was the question posed by the American sociologist and economic historian, Immanuel Wallerstein (2005). His answer was, "Obviously, quite a lot. Names define the boundaries of identity. Names define claimed historical legacies. Names define opposites or opponents. Names define what one is not…names of course symbolize alliance" (pp. 35-36). At the time, Wallerstein was focusing on the recently adopted "Latin@" designation for the population that is being studied here. Wallerstein (2005) continued by acknowledging that names do not last long, and he was correct. Since 2014, the term increasingly used to describe the population studied within this study are now collectively known as the "Latinx" community (Curwen, 2020). The challenge of what is in a name, as Wallerstein (2005) described, continues to cause some wrestling even within the Latinx community as the term has gained acceptance mostly in academia and amongst activists, but has been slow to be embraced even by college Latinx students as they move from the university to their own communities (Salinas, 2020).

Although scholars such as Engel (2017) asserted that the term is indigenized to connect these peoples to their Nahuatl heritage, Salinas (2020) finds fault in this thinking as Nahuatl was the language primarily only spoken by the Indigenous peoples of Aztlán

(United States Southwest which eventually encompassed the modern Mexican nation-state) while other Indigenous communities in Latin America do not have the "x" in their alphabet. Salinas' (2020) found the earliest uses of "Latinx" to have been to challenge gender binaries encoded in the Spanish language within academia in the body of literature and amongst some college gender-inclusive student groups. The challenges of the new term are that those who have used it within their research have not defined the term. Here the term "Latinx" is used to describe the population that has historically been identified as Latino, Latina, Latina/o, Latin@, Latin, Latin American, and Hispanic. The term is meant to be inclusive of all people from the Caribbean, México, and other countries that comprise Central and South America.

The people impacted by the problem being studied are Latinx families as they navigate Georgia's tax-credit scholarship program. The focus is on the experience(s) of Latinx parents: however, their experience(s) deal with their children's education. Thus, it is truly a Latinx family problem. Latinx parents are defined as parents of students who identify as being of Latin American heritage.

United States Census (2019) data estimates that as of July 2019, there were approximately 10.6 million Latinx peoples in Georgia, accounting for just under 10% of the overall population. As of 2015, Georgia had the fastest-growing Latinx population in the United States of America, accounting for 10% of the overall population (Flores, 2017). Latinx parents are located all over the state of Georgia. United States Census data (2010) estimated that there were 168 Latinx people per square mile in Georgia, with the highest percentage in a Georgia county being 36% of the population and the smallest being just under 2%.

For this study, the President of GOAL, agreed to share all their data (something SSOs have been criticized for not doing). GOAL Scholarship Inc. is the largest student scholarship organization (SSO) in the State of Georgia. Their self-reported numbers indicate that 7.9% of their scholarship recipients are Latinx (Georgia GOAL Scholarship Inc., 2020). To prepare to conduct this research, I requested a list of Catholic schools that use GOAL Scholarship Inc. as their student scholarship organization (SSO). In my conversation with the research site's gatekeeper, I requested confirmation that they had Latinx families present who received the GOAL Scholarship. Their confirmation ensured that the sites I selected had that population present.

From the list provided by GOAL Scholarship Inc., five potential research sites (schools) were identified. Each research site was then organized based upon population density in order to ensure geographic variation.

### *Setting*

Place plays a central role within narrative inquiry. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) define place as "the specific concrete, physical, and topological boundaries of place or sequences of places where the inquiry and events take place" (p. 480). In his work titled, *Place*, Tim Cresswell (2015) asserted that place is the most important term in human geography (as well as other disciplines such as philosophy) and makes a strong argument that place is central to our everyday life (p. 1). Indeed, place serves as a powerful concept. As an example, what emotions are evoked when thinking about places such as: Tiananmen Square, Kent State, Wall Street, or Ferguson? What makes these examples places versus a town or a street? Because people and events give these places meaning. Cresswell (2015) summarized the importance of place by acknowledging that "place is

also a way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world" (p. 18). Within this study, selecting the place(s) where the research would be executed was as important a component as any other. The stories shared by the Latinx families were all shaped in some form by their place.

A key component to the execution of this study was the relationships created with the "gatekeepers" of the schools. To better focus this study, a list of Catholic schools that used the student scholarship organization (SSO), GOAL Scholarship Inc., was solicited. That number of potential sites was small since all diocesan Catholic schools use a diocesan created SSO called "GRACE Scholars." The only Catholic schools that use GOAL Scholarship Inc were independent Catholic schools. Independent Catholic schools are those run by monastic orders and are independent of Diocesan control. Access to these schools was integral to being able to execute this research. With only six schools available, gaining access proved to be much more important than initially thought. To gain access to these schools, these gatekeepers, often the head of school, were contacted through email and phone calls. Each head of school was given a summation of the study and asked to have a follow-up conversation when he/she had time. The heads of school who responded were then invited to an online video communications meeting (Google Meets, Microsoft Teams, or Zoom). During the approximately 15-minute meeting, the gatekeeper was shown the research proposal Microsoft PowerPoint presentation. Following the presentation, the researcher answered any questions posed by the gatekeeper and the meeting ended with requesting permission to conduct the research at their school. For the purposes of this study, the three sites

proved to be as much a representative sample as possible given the confines of the research methodology selected.

The three schools that served as the research sites cover several geographic areas of Georgia. For a Catholic school to be present in each area there must be a substantial Catholic population to support the school within that community. According to the Washington Post, Georgia ranked number 47 out of 50 states in total Catholic population, with Catholics representing nine percent of the total population (Chokshi, 2015). Of that Catholic population, three percent were classified as "Hispanic Catholics." This lack of a significant Catholic population across the state meant that Catholic school options were not plentiful.

In terms of population, the research sites were within counties that are occupied by 1.06 million people, 289 thousand people, and 128 thousand people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The counties represent coastal Georgia, the Piedmont region, and an urban area of the state. Leading into the study, the hope was that by representing different regions of the state, the participants' experiences may have a different aspect to add to the narrative.

All three schools are college preparatory schools. One of the schools has its founding dating back to the early part of the 20th century. It is a single-gender high school that serves under 500 students. The tuition is about $15,000.

The second research site is a school that was founded in the latter part of the 20th century. It serves under 500 students from nursery through high school. It is a co-ed institution. The tuition ranges from just above $5,000 to about $25,000.

The third school was founded in the early part of the 21st century. It serves high school students and is a co-ed institution. It has under 200 students. The tuition for this school is about $10,000.

### *Sampling*

**Sample Size.** Unlike the rigidity of sampling in quantitative research, "there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry" (Patton, 2015). In qualitative research, sample sizes are often based upon inquiry approaches instead of statistical desires (Patton, 2015). The first factor that determined my minimum sample size was the narrative research design. Because narrative research can have as few as one participant, for this study, the primary determinant of a required sample was determined when data saturation was reached. At the onset of this study, the plan was to select two sets of Latinx parents from each research site. This meant that the study's ideal sample size was six participants. What I found was when the new data I was gathering simply reinforced what I had already seen, then I knew the sample size was appropriate. Overall, I sought a research design that balances breadth and depth. The desire was to get to a point where, as I evaluated my data, I reached a point where I felt that my categories, themes, or findings were robust enough to cover what could emerge from future data.

Purposeful sampling was utilized to select the study's participants. A homogeneous sampling procedure ensures that the data gleaned will be answered by the intended population, thus fulfilling the study's purpose (Maxwell, 2013). Unlike best practices in quantitative research, this qualitative study is not predicated on ensuring that a representative sample is necessary. Nevertheless, I began with a desire to build in participant selection strategies to account for possible differences in socioeconomic strati

and other possible biases due to different geographic areas within Georgia. My hope of being able to select from a pool of participants was not realized. I had to accept those families that volunteered to participate.

**Participant Recruitment.** Participant recruitment did not begin until Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was given (Appendix A). Capturing two sets of parents at each site was the initial goal. I created a participant recruitment flyer (Appendix B) in English and Spanish asking for participants and offered a donation made toward their child's tuition to encourage participation. The head of school, or his/her designee, shared the recruitment flyer through email with their parents. Either the head of school or the designee then shared with me any Latinx parents who expressed interest. I then sent each participant an email introducing myself and asking to set up a conversation to clarify what was being asked occurring through a Zoom meeting or over the telephone. Following the first meeting, I then sent the informed consent form through email and asked for it to be signed. Once I received the signed copy, I then forwarded it back to the parents for their records and set up the first interview.

Fortunately, those that expressed interest came from varied backgrounds. These differences enabled me to address the concern of credibility as much as possible in a qualitative study of a representative sample. The participants included those from different socio-economic statuses, whose familial structures (married, single parent) were varied, and their ethnic backgrounds varied.

### *Data Collection*

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument in data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). Although that may be the case, it is still

incumbent that protocols for interview procedures be established as well as interview guides created. Seidman (2013) offers caution to the careless interviewer due to the concern of interviewers imposing their interest and neglecting the experience(s) of the participant as the driver of the interview. With that caution in mind, before the first interview, an interview guide was drafted. The guide began with interview protocols, including a greeting, the verbatim reading of the research consent statement, and a request for permission to record the interview. Each interview guide was crafted according to the purpose of that interview, within the structure of Seidman's (2013) three interview series. Recognizing the importance of each open-ended question, the interview guide was crafted to ensure that all relevant topics were covered (Patton, 2015).

In a narrative research approach, individual lives serve as the primary source of data (Bloom, 2002; Patton, 2015). As important as the research questions are to frame what this study sought to add to the body of literature, the interview questions are what generated the data needed to fill the gap identified (Maxwell, 2013). The questions were open-ended to allow the participant to answer the question in their voice, enhancing the use of in-vivo coding. Additional lines of inquiry were explored as the interview became more conversational based upon their answers to the scripted questions.

Face validity refers to "the extent to which examinees believe the instrument is measuring what it is supposed to measure" (Ary et al., 2014, p. 245). In this case, it was important for the interview guides to demonstrate, on its face, that it is garnering what is intended. At the top of the interview guide is the purpose statement and my four research questions. This was meant to be a reminder of the purpose of that interview within my overall study. I highlighted those research questions which the interview questions were

meant to answer. Although a pre-crafted interview guide was used as a reference, per Seidman's (2013) recommendation for in-depth interviews, the questions most used followed what the participant said. Pre-crafted interview questions tied to each research question needing to be addressed were pre-written on the interview guide. The pre-crafted interview questions were open-ended to elicit responses and to limit researcher bias (Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2013). Should the participant cover one of the interview questions in the explanation of their experience(s), the question was not repeated to avoid disruption of the flow of the interview.

For this study, semi-structured interviews were employed to answer the research questions. Following Seidman's (2013) approach to qualitative research, a total of three interviews, approximately 90-minutes in length, were initially planned for each research participant. Nevertheless, the researcher remained flexible in the length of each interview as the ultimate desire was to continue interviewing until data saturation was reached. Although Seidman's (2013) recommendation is for the three interviews to happen within a week's time of the previous interview, due to scheduling logistics, the three interviews occurred within a three-month time frame (Appendix C). The first two interviews were focused on the participant's experiences before soliciting attitudes or opinions about Georgia's school choice program. Another benefit of following Seidman's approach is that the three-interview structure assists in bridging cross-racial differences between the interviewer and the interviewee (Seidman, 2013). As a White researcher interviewing Latinx parents, returning to the participant three (or more) times allowed me to demonstrate respect, thoughtfulness, and interest in their experiences.

The first interview (Appendix D) focused on the participant's life and experiences in the context of the research topic (Seidman, 2013). Questions included asking the parents to reflect upon their own educational experiences as a child. Questions pertaining to their child(ren)'s educational experiences were also asked. The time period asked to recollect was up until the time they received financial assistance through the Georgia Qualified Education Program. Because the focus of the study relates to schooling, that was the central focus in recounting their life. Questions and prompts included: "tell me how your own educational experiences relate or were counter to your child's," "what experiences in school do you reflect most fondly upon," or "what experiences in school do you wish to forget?"

During the second interview (Appendix E), I focused on their experiences directly relating to moving their child from their districted public school to a private school. These interview questions were mapped to address each research question directly. Examples include "tell me about your child's public school experience" and "elaborate upon the factors that led you to decide to move your child from their districted public school to a private school," which are linked to research question one. An interview prompt tied to research question three was, "describe to me the entire process that you embarked upon to receive financial assistance from your student scholarship organization (SSO)." An interview question tied to research question four asked, "what private schools did you visit or consider and what qualities made you choose the one that your child attends at this moment?" Questions were crafted in order to avoid soliciting the participant's opinions. What was desired were the details to reconstruct their experiences before moving on to the third interview.

The third interview (Appendix F) focused on asking the participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. Previous interview data was cited, especially their recollections of their past and their experiences that led them to be a participant in my study. A question was, "Given what you said about your own educational experiences as a child, how do you understand your participation in Georgia's school choice program?" A similar question was, "Given what you have reconstructed in these interviews, what advice do you have for other parents in the Latinx community as they evaluate whether school choice is an option for their own family?"

After being granted access by the gatekeeper of each school, which was the Principal or the Head of School, either they themselves or a colleague shared the participant recruitment flyer with their parents (Appendix B). Those parents then replied to them that they were interested. That school official then let me know the name and contact of those Latinx parents who expressed interest. I reached out via my school email to set up an initial discussion via Zoom, which is an online video conferencing tool, Apple's FaceTime, which is a proprietary videotelephony product, or through a phone call. The first meeting was just to introduce myself, go over the participant flyer, and ask if there were any questions they had or if I could clarify anything. All parents that were interviewed remained interested in participating, so I followed up by requesting that they sign the Participant Consent Statement so that we could proceed with the study. Following their submission of the signed Participant Consent Statement, the first round of interviews was scheduled.

The medium for the interviews were chosen by the participants based upon their desire(s). Regardless of medium, all interviews were recorded on a voice recorder. The

voice recordings of all interviews completed in English were then uploaded online using a professional transcription software online program called Transcribe by Wreally Studios. That transcription was then copied to a Microsoft Word document. At the top of the transcription was a header identifying the participant, who had since been given a pseudonym, the interview number, and the timeframe of the interview. The interview was then listened to in its entirety to ensure that it accurately reflected what was stated by the interviewer and the participants. The interviews that were completed in Spanish were translated to English and transcribed by the researcher. Quickly turning around the transcript allowed additional time to reflect and analyze the interviews, individually and collectively. Once the transcription was completed, the fully transcribed document was then uploaded to MAXQDA, which is a qualitative computer data analysis program, for data analysis.

### *Data Analysis*

Patton (2015) best summarized what is sought for in narrative analysis: "The central idea of narrative analysis remains, that stories offer especially translucent windows into cultural and social meanings when understood and analyzed as narratives (p. 128). Recalling the purpose of this study, which is to fill in a gap in the literature by examining how Latinx parents are navigating school choice in Georgia, the goal was to provide a window into these participants experiences. Data analysis was multifaceted to fulfill this purpose. As recommended by Maxwell (2013), data analysis included reading, thinking, and analyzing interview transcripts, writing memos, coding interview transcripts, as well as analyzing the narrative structure and contextual relationships. Data collection and analysis coincided. As I made my way through this study, I reflected on

my study's purpose before beginning my analysis. Similarly, I reflected on my epistemological framework and the theories I employed as part of my theoretical framework.

Following Creswell and Creswell's (2018) recommendation for research reflexivity, I made it a habit of memoing about my reflections, hunches, ideas, future desires, and tentative themes. These documents helped ensure that I could relate back to my line of thinking, as well as provide an audit trail for others if desired. As I progressed from the first round of interviews and data collection, I paused to compare each set of data so that my reflections informed each subsequent set of data. Doing so ensured that I would not overlook burgeoning categories or themes by only focusing on the data in front of me or waiting until the end only to realize that I had missed something significant.

As discussed in the data collection section, each interview was recorded using a voice recorder. That voice recording was then uploaded to Transcribe by Wreally Studios for transcription. The transcription was then copied and edited within a Microsoft Word document. The completed Word document was then uploaded in MAXQDA for data analysis. The data analysis was completed using two cycles of coding: in-vivo coding and subsequently followed by focused coding.

**First-cycle coding.** Just as in hand coding, each line of text was interpreted and coded as needed. Saldaña (2016) suggested that the research questions and theoretical approach(es) can often drive what type of coding one should use. My research questions are primarily ontological, thus for the first cycle of coding, in-vivo coding was implemented to better reveal these ontologies. In-vivo coding was selected specifically to provide a platform for this marginalized community using their own voices, and

because it will give the answers that are needed for the specific research questions. Each subsequent interview transcript was coded with the intention of lumping the codes upon the completion of the first round of coding.

**Second-cycle coding.** According to Saldaña (2016), in addition to second cycle coding, memo writing served to assist in generating codes and categories; therefore, analytic researcher memos and second cycle coding was used to make sense of what was becoming apparent during the study, to reorganize first cycle codes, and to narrow down the number of codes to a broader list of categories, concepts, and/or themes. Focused coding was applied as the method of second cycle coding. Focused coding can follow in-vivo coding to develop major categories and themes from the first cycle of analysis. Similarly, the use of MAXQDA lends itself to focus coding. Through this second cycle of coding, the intent was to compare the new codes across the participants' data and to assess comparability and transferability (Saldaña, 2016).

Following the second round of coding, the goal was to have reduced all of the categories to five or six themes. These themes were designed to answer the research questions and the stated purpose of the study. Following the second round of coding, I then sought to complete a final round of data analysis based upon narrative design. Patton (2015) described the central idea of narrative analysis as "that stories offer especially translucent windows into cultural and social meanings when understood and analyzed as narratives" (p. 128). The focus of narrative design analysis is to turn participants' stories into a narrative by using structural devices such as setting, plot, and climax. Since my participants are from the Latinx community, additional focus was given to social and cultural referents. Through the process of narrative smoothing, I

attempted to weave an interesting story while remaining faithful to my participants' accounts. Kim (2016) described the final story, configured through narrative analysis, as having "to appeal to readers in a way that helps them empathize with the protagonist's lived experiences as understandable human phenomena" (p. 336). For my dissertation to make an impact, the Latinx parents' experiences were conveyed, as an attempt to help the reader understand this experience.

### *Reliability and Validity*

The standards of rigor in qualitative research focus on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility in qualitative research is analogous to internal validity in quantitative research. Credibility refers to "the truthfulness of the inquiry's findings" (Ary et al., 2014, p. 531). To address credibility, I employed many low-inference descriptors by using a significant number of direct quotations. Through research memos and other notes, I employed reflexivity to combat any researcher bias. Lastly, I employed member checks to ensure that I am presenting their experiences and meanings accurately (Ary et al., 2014).

Transferability is analogous to the quantitative research concern with external validity. Transferability is "the degree to which the findings of a qualitative study can be applied or generalized to other contexts or to other groups" (Ary et al., 2014, p. 534). Due to myriad qualitative research design features, generalizability to a larger population is not a goal or accepted as a good practice. Only in very similar contexts is transferability of findings appropriate. Aspects of this study's research design, such as the selection of research sites and the diversity of the participants, were meant to mitigate threats to transferability, such as selection effects and setting effects. It is understood that

the strength of the research design and data analysis will be evaluated by other researchers to determine transferability to other contexts (Patton, 2015).

Dependability (also called "trustworthiness") is analogous to reliability in quantitative research (Ary et al., 2014). Replication is a difficult aspect to ask of qualitative research. Qualitative researchers expect variation, but dependability is the degree to which variation can be explained or tracked. Again, measures were taken to address this concern. Triangulation of all the qualitative data gathered was employed in order to address trustworthiness (Ary et al., 2014). Similarly, an audit trail was left by documenting many of the important aspects of this research study, such as what was done, when, and why. Lastly, replication logic, by completing the study in multiple locations with multiple participants, was also employed (Ary et al., 2014).

Confirmability is analogous to the quantitative research concept of objectivity. Neutrality is a key concept in every form of research (Ary et al., 2014). Confirmability is a concern of qualitative researchers that others, when looking at the data and interpretations, would come to similar conclusions. Through the reflexivity exercises mentioned above, and by providing an audit trail for other researchers to analyze, I attempted to hedge against this possible issue.

### *Ethical Issues*

Maxwell (2013) noted that the relationships a researcher creates and negotiates with the participants and "gatekeepers" is a key part of one's design decisions (Negotiating Research Relationships, para 1). I made great efforts to ensure that my research does not do harm to my participants or their child(ren). This study was meant to provide a vehicle for them to express their experiences with the Georgia tax-credit

scholarship program. Through their voices, this study is intended to be a beneficial experience for the participants since the research demonstrates that the Latinx population has been marginalized in terms of collecting their experiences. To minimize the fear of risk in participating, each participant's identity was kept confidential. By providing a narrative of each participant, I took great measures to protect the participant's identity as well as the location of any sites where my research is completed. I did not ask the immigration status of any of my participants, and, if they openly told me, then I omitted their immigration status from my study. Their safety and security must be paramount.

For the protection of the schools, I also used broad descriptors of the site. This was an essential assurance that I provided private school Heads to allow me to request participants directly from their community. Similarly, I used pseudonyms to protect any school personnel's true identities for their interviews. Because the Latinx parents that I interviewed have chosen their academic institution for their child's education, I was correct that there were more positive reviews than critiques of each school. Regardless of the information shared in the interview, every head of school would love to read the positive review(s) as well as know if there was some kind of ugly undercurrent against any of their students' families.

The only remaining ethical issue is transparency. My academic institution uses the GOAL scholarship for our families who enroll from public schools. We are one of the biggest GOAL recipients in the state because our advancement office does such a wonderful job raising money from our community for this endeavor. Nevertheless, the participants' experiences speak for themselves. I have reported fairly without regard for GOAL Scholarship Inc. or for Georgia's tax-credit scholarship program.

### *Pilot Study*

Maxwell (2013) encourages pilot studies to assist the researcher in "developing an understanding of the concepts and theories held by the people you are studying" (Pilot and Exploratory Studies, para 3). Seidman (2013) concurs, describing the practice as "the best advice I ever received as a researcher (p. 65). I conducted a pilot study in the Fall of 2019. The participant was a single mother of a twelfth-grade student at a local Catholic school in southeast Georgia. She was a very hard-working mother, sometimes working three jobs, to ensure that her son did not experience some of the negative experiences that she had experienced or witnessed. One of her jobs was at the local Latinx newspaper, so she was heavily involved in the local Latinx community. She was born and raised in San Luis Potosí, México. Her son, a first-generation American, was in public schools until high school and, by her own words, was only able to attend this private school because of the Georgia Qualified Education Program. The interview occurred in a small office in the school building. The interview lasted approximately an hour and a half. I recorded the 90-minute interview on a voice recording device, then transcribed the audio recording.

When I began to review the transcription, I looked for aspects that jumped out as surprising or reassuring based upon my initial review of what literature was available. Having just one participant in the pilot led to data supported by the literature review above, as well as data that challenged the current body of research. The participant was not a member of the middle class, as has been an indicator of school choice participation in other studies (Taylor Haynes et al., 2010). Her choice to enter the school choice

marketplace when her son was preparing to matriculate to high school has been documented as a theme in other studies (Handler, 2018; Joseph, 2012).

While there were several key takeaways from the pilot study, I only had one interview to rely upon at that moment. Until I began the study, I did not know if her experiences were shared by other Latinx parents or not (although the literature indicated that it was a shared experience). Although she was bilingual, she experienced difficulty applying for and maintaining the financial assistance from the program because the financial documents to be submitted to the State of Georgia, and the documents pertaining to the particular student scholarship organization (SSO), were exclusively in English. Those of us who are native English speakers can understand the frustration of navigating financial documents, which include legal and accounting terms. Although a majority of the Latinx population is bilingual (Flores et al., 2019; Krogstad & Gonzalez-Barrerra, 2015), one can only imagine the difficulty of doing so in a learned second language. In the best sense, forcing English-only documents is nearsighted. In the worst sense, it is meant to inhibit certain groups from obtaining this assistance purposefully.

In reflecting on the Latinx community that she is a part of, she made several observations that caused me to further refine this study. She mentioned the educational attainment level of the parents as being an indicator of participation in school choice and valuing education. She was a college graduate of Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí. As a college graduate, she placed a high level of importance on education but recognized that some peers saw high school as only an option because of their need to bring in money for the family. I highlighted this answer and put a question mark to ensure that I circled back to this assertion. Research confirms the importance placed

upon familial financial support among some members of the Latinx community (Cross et al., 2019; Hill & Torres, 2010; Joseph, 2012; Taylor Haynes et al., 2010; Terriquez, 2012).

Something that I had not foreseen was her response about the Latinx community's participation in this program. She explained that, while most of the children that she knew were American citizens by birth, some parents, due to their documentation status, would not seek to be involved in a program because that included dealing with a state government agency. Viewing this study as dealing strictly with school choice, I had not considered documentation status as being a possible factor in the participation of any group of parents. Yet again, her sentiment appears to have some validity (Cross et al., 2019; Eastman, Anderson, & Boyles, 2017; Yoshikawa, 2011).

# Chapter IV

# FINDINGS

## *Introduction*

There is a research gap pertaining to how Latinx families, who seek a better life for their children, navigate school choice in the United States. The voices of these Latinx parents represent a marginalized community. Guided by Seidman's (2013) interview process, rich qualitative data was obtained. By reading their stories and reviewing the corresponding themes, later expounded upon, it is clear these families are seeking what has been called the "American Dream."[1] Unfortunately, as members of the Latinx community, there are obstacles to their attainment of opportunities that others may take for granted.

Seidman (2013) asserted:

> …telling stories is a compelling way to make sense of interview data. The story is both the participant's and the interviewer's. It is in the participant's words, but it is crafted by the interviewer from what the participant has said. (p. 166)

Walking the fine line of presenting the participant's words and crafting a narrative was key for this study as two of the participant's interviews were completed solely in Spanish, and the other three sets of parents were interviewed in English. For those

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[1] Quotation marks have been placed around the "American Dream" as the concept is not without criticism, especially by critical theorists. See Hill and Torres (2010) for a discussion on the Latinx community, the "American Dream", and education.

participants interviewed in Spanish, capturing their words and stories as told was essential. This meant that translation became a key component. A technical note of importance in translating between English and Spanish is the difference in the volume of words between the two languages. The Spanish language has approximately 90,000 words. The English language has just over 600,000 (Erichsen, 2019). Both are conservative estimates, but that difference makes translation a meaningful component.

## *Participant Narratives*

The findings of this research were obtained through three separate interviews of seven Latinx parents. These participants were selected by the use purposeful sampling. School gate keepers pushed out an electronic copy of the research participant flyer to the parents that met the criteria to participate, which was (1) being a Latinx parent and (2) their child(ren) attending their private school of choice using GOAL Scholarship financial aid. Latinx people are a diverse group of people making transferability of the findings questionable. Because of this, qualitative researchers are encouraged to provide as much detail about participants as possible, while striving to maintain anonymity (Delgado-Romero, Singh, & De Los Santos, 2018). This is a delicate line to negotiate since the details are what make the participants and their lived experiences come to life. The following participant narratives were crafted with as much detail as possible, while attempting to maintain the anonymity of each participant (Appendix G).

### *Participant 1: María*

**Biographical information.** María was a 33-year-old female, of Mexican descent, who was born in Austin, Texas. She was the first of her siblings born in the United States, with her two older sisters being born in México, and was followed by a younger

sister and younger brother. María's parents were both born in Querétaro, México. Although both grew up farming, as their parents had done, María's father eventually picked up construction as a trade. María was unsure about her parents' highest level of education, but she did recall that neither completed any tertiary education. Upon entering the United States, María's family bounced around from Texas to Florida and eventually to Georgia, usually following the construction work that her father was able to obtain. Her mother bounced back and forth from working in housekeeping and staying at home. María spoke most often about her mother taking care of her and her siblings and was the parent most vested in her education.

María's earliest educational memories were in Florida, but the majority of her educational experience was in Georgia. María, and her siblings, attended public schools. María had fond memories of elementary school, where there were "very nice people," the environment was "homey," everyone felt "like family," and "you were not scared to go there." Things changed for María in middle school where there were "so many more kids in one room" and where the teachers were "different," acknowledging that those educators were having to address a different age group, "So it wasn't like we're being babied anymore." Fast forward to high school where the relationships with the educators changed. María described only coming into contact with teachers who truly cared "every now and then." This lack of relationships led many of her peers, and María herself, to drop out of high school. Soon after dropping out, in the eleventh grade, María got pregnant with her son, which is what led to her participation in this study.

Early in the relationship, María and her husband went through an "on and off type situation" when they were not married, but he always remained present in her son's life.

Age was not the only challenge that María faced early in her motherhood. Within María's immediate community she described the consistent comments that were made to her and her father about her choice in courting a Black man. As impactful as the comments were, María persevered.

María began working with her father and even pursued her GED at a local technical college. Out of the six siblings, only one pursued tertiary education. Eventually work and life got in the way of María's pursuit of a GED, and she shifted her focus to providing for her family. Today, several of her siblings work in the hospitality industry and María works in sales. María's husband currently works as a flooring tech and works with María's father from time to time. María and her husband now have four sons.

**Navigating school choice.** María's son's earliest educational experiences were in the public school system. Early in his educational career, he struggled academically and behaviorally to the point of being retained in the first grade. Frustrated, María moved him to another elementary school. María was cautiously hopeful about the new elementary school as at this school, unlike the previous school, he was one of the few students from a non-dominant group. Quickly though, he seemed to have flourished. His grades went up, the behavior problems ceased, and he loved school. Moreover, one of the teachers took a keen interest in her son and would remain a close confidant to the present day.

The first time María participated in school choice was when her son was preparing to start middle school. María's district was unique in that it was a choice district, meaning that parent(s) had the opportunity to select which schools, public or charter, they desired their child attend as each school had a particular program focus. She

chose a local charter school she had heard positive reviews about from community members and, most importantly, was recommended by the teacher that was closest to the family. The positive experiences continued through middle school. María's son made honor roll, excelled in sports, and was given the school's President Award. Then came the opportunity to select what high school was best for him. Unlike previous school choices, this time her son had a significant voice in the decision.

According to the location of their home, the districted public school was a well-established school that has a CCRPI score in "C" and "D" range with an international baccalaureate diploma as its specialty program. María and her son visited two other public high schools to compare with their districted school. As María visited the high schools, she continued to reflect upon her own high school experiences. A consistent feeling was the fear of her son getting lost among so many students, and how she recollected that there were few high school teachers that cared the way she felt her elementary school teachers did for her. Another concern María expressed was the predictable distractions that come within a high school setting, and those resulting from the use of social media. María recalled another option that she had not considered for her son's middle school, an option mentioned by her son's middle school coach and by his elementary school teacher, a local Catholic school.

With private schooling now in mind, María and her son visited three different high school options: a Baptist school, a "prep" school, and the Catholic school. The first step for María and her son was an in-person visit. María said that it was during her visit to the Catholic school that she was first made aware of the GOAL scholarship by the Admissions Director. Knowing that there was financial assistance, private education for

the first time appeared attainable. With so many options, how were she and her son going to make the best decision?

Unlike middle school, María wanted this important decision to be left to her son. "I wanted him to make that decision," said María. "I wanted him to see that this is the choice I made." In addition to the many options, her son's athletic ability caused a number of people to offer their opinion, often unsolicited. Race, and concern for how her son may be the only or one of the only non-dominant students in the classroom, was also an issue. For María, she felt race was not a big deal and believed it would not be for her son either. María's son had already experienced a majority non-dominant student school and a school with more heterogeneity. She recognized that her son would have to navigate the majority-White private school environment, as a member of a non-dominant group, if that was his choice. After the visits, María and her son sat down to discuss his options.

Using the pamphlets and handouts received during the visits, María and her son began to create their own list of the positives and negatives of each school. María indicated that for her it was also about location, in terms of proximity to their home, and safety, in terms of the day-to-day activities within the school and the neighborhood where the school was located. María met with her son, and it was obvious that his mind was made up. He felt the best fit was the Catholic school. With her son's mind made up, María began to dig deeper into the school's website and the remaining "thing in the air was definitely the financial aspect." "How much was it going to cost, and could we afford it?," said María, "it played a big part." "Without the help, I'm not sure if he was

going to be able to attend." With the decision made, María reached out to the Catholic school to begin the enrollment process.

"I had to fill out a lot of paperwork," said María, talking about the GOAL scholarship application process. Some of the paperwork that was requested, María did not even know if she had or how to get it. Fortunately, for María, the Catholic school had an individual who oversaw financial aid, and who assisted María along the way.

**Experience(s) within a new school community.** "I will say it's going great," María exuded when asked about her satisfaction with her son's experience(s) at the new school. "I see a lot of growth. I can see him growing into a man…a strong-minded man, making good choices. He's gotten serious with academics and with sports." María, a Catholic herself, was satisfied that her son was learning more about the Catholic religion. His favorite teacher, at that moment, was his theology teacher, who was a monk. "He's just getting focused, really focused, on what he wants to achieve." María felt that the progress her son has made would not have occurred in the public school district because "their graduation rates are not very good." She felt the faculty at his new school care about him and his future. At the new school, her son feels that he is a part of a brotherhood and is very close to his new friends. When probed about her son's friend group, she described him being friends with members of various groups, including other Latino students.

María also felt that this experience has made her more aware, as a parent, of school settings and what to anticipate for her younger children. María did not recall additional requirements made to continue receiving the GOAL scholarship. She cited financial aid as the biggest challenge in her acclimation to the Catholic school. Socially,

María acknowledges that she only has a few relationships with parents, but cites her time spent with her youngest children as the reason that is not a more significant part of her experience. "It's just that I don't really have time to sit down and chat."

**Personal reflections.** As María reflected on her journey and what advice she would share with other Latinx parents, she said "don't be scared or too proud," talking about exploring private school options and inquiring about financial assistance. She felt that Latinx parents need to find someone who is willing to help, someone who has navigated this process, especially if there is a language barrier. Reflecting on what meaning she gives to this experience she said, "It means making the best decision that you can for your child's future." "I had never been through this. I never knew what to do. I didn't do it for myself. My parents didn't do it with me." María said she wanted her son's educational experience to be better than hers and, "that way it won't be so hard," which is why she began this journey.

*Participants 2 and 3: Fernando and Daniela*

**Biographical information.** Fernando, 41, and Daniela, 39, are both from Hidalgo, México. They came to the United States in their late teens and have remained in the Southeast, only returning to México temporarily to care for their sick parents. Having met just before high school, Fernando and Daniela, now married, have four sons, one in college, one in high school, one in middle school, and one in elementary school, at the time of this study. Fernando is a painter by trade. Daniela is a stay-at-home mother.

Fernando grew up as one of seven children, living with his mom, dad, and grandmother. Fernando's father was in construction and his mother was a stay-at-home mom. Daniela grew up as one of seven children. Her father was in construction and her

mother was a stay-at-home mother. Daniela and Fernando's siblings completed high school and worked in different occupations. Fernando's parents finished high school. Daniela's parents only made it through elementary school. By both accounts, their parents had to work extremely hard to support their families.

Fernando and Daniela attended public schools. While reflecting on their education, a consistent theme was the additional responsibility to work to support their families. Fernando described himself as a normal boy, but often "was more interested in playing games, you know, everything that was happening outside of school rather than actual schoolwork." Unlike her husband, Daniela was very well behaved and paid attention in school.

Fernando and Daniela came to the United States "for a better future for our children" and to "afford to send our parents money because they do not have much in the way of savings." They knew that they could make more money in the United States working within the same occupations. Upon moving to the United States, the lack of fluency in English kept Fernando and Daniela from initially realizing the "American dream." The family moved to South Carolina before finding their current residence in Georgia. Many of the neighborhoods that they lived in also were heavily populated by other Spanish-speaking families. Fernando's English proficiency improved as he worked with more English-speaking co-workers. He credits watching television with teaching his sons English while growing up. Within a year, the family moved to Georgia and their son began his formal education in elementary school.

Fernando and Daniela's son attended their districted K-8 school where he remained for the entirety of his K-8 experience. The school originally only had one other

Latino family that they were aware of, but over the years many more Latino families had children enrolled. They cited families from México, Honduras, and Puerto Rico. Fernando and Daniela said that their son has always been academically gifted, having learned to read and write at the age of three. He had many great experiences in terms of academic success, caring teachers, and a tight-knit friend group.

**Navigating school choice.** Fernando and Daniela said their son made his desire to attend the local Catholic high school known as early as sixth grade. They said he focused immensely on making good grades so that his application would be strong. At that time, his older brother had already matriculated through their districted public high school. Also at that time, another Latinx family, whom Fernando and Daniela already knew, had enrolled their son at the Catholic school. During his middle school years, Fernando and Daniela's son remained focused on his goal. In the meantime, the mother of the older Latino student, who was enrolled at the Catholic school, stayed in touch with Fernando and Daniela and sang the praises of her son's experience.

When asked about their investigation of the Catholic school, Fernando and Daniela said, "We attended an open house, but it was principally through our son investigating everything online and then by word of mouth." Their son had his reasons for desiring the Catholic school, but for Fernando and Daniela the most important aspects were academics and tuition. Daniela said that the mother of the older Latino student, from their K-8 school, who attended their Catholic Church, told her just to call the school and that they would make sure it was affordable. Their son continued to handle much of the application process, although once he was accepted Daniela called the school to inquire about the financial aid process. The school had a personnel member devoted to

financial aid and made Daniela aware of the GOAL scholarship. "She helped us every step of the way, and whenever I had a question, she had a response or a way to find out the answer and so she took us through the rest of the process," said Daniela. Additionally, the paperwork they filled out was in English, which for Fernando and Daniela was their second language, one in which they still did not feel proficient.

For Fernando and Daniela, the GOAL scholarship process was a significant endeavor. Fernando said, "We recognized that we were going into a fairly long process. It required a lot of information. It required a lot of patience because we had to find information that we didn't have available right away." The concern about finances played a very important role as they considered entering the private education world. "We understood that once we got the email from GOAL, we would be able to make a decision as to whether or not our son could enroll," said Fernando. Both parents explained to their son that his ability to attend the school depended on financial aid. Their son got to work, filling out the online application for them. A significant challenge in completing the GOAL application was Fernando's gap in tax returns due to their moves back and forth between México and the United States. To their son's frustration, another hiccup came due to Daniela's passport being taken during one of the trips back home. After seeking further assistance from a friend back in South Carolina to assist in gathering additional paperwork, they received good news. The email came stating that they were approved, and the amount of financial assistance fit their budget. This was just in time for final decisions regarding the upcoming school year's enrollment.

**Experience(s) within a new school community.** Their son's experience did not start the way any of them foresaw. It was the spring of their son's eighth-grade year that

COVID-19 changed the world as they knew it. When the Catholic school started in August, they began in a blended-learning environment where each group of students rotated from in-person to online learning every day. Furthermore, everyone was in masks, and the school asked parents to keep their children distanced from one another on the weekend. The effects of COVID-19 caused his freshmen orientation to the new school to drag out.

Fernando and Daniela acknowledged that as COVID protocols eased, he fit right in, and they have seen a continuation of the academic success he achieved in middle school, as well as his growth as a young man. During his first two years, their son developed what they described as a very strong friendship group. They also cited strong relationships with several instructors, one of which was a Latino teacher. Fernando and Daniela asserted that they do feel accepted as a part of the school's community. They acknowledged that as their son struggled to become acclimated, so did they. It was through sports, particularly soccer, that they participated in the new community the most.

**Personal reflections.** Fernando and Daniela reflect on their experience as a difficult process, but one that they believe will have positive effects on their son. They stressed that the school's high expectations for the students have followed their son home and his demeanor has impacted the entire family. "We saw the school as a wonderful school and a wonderful opportunity, and we're glad that we went through the process," said Fernando. They were both extremely grateful to the personnel member who helped them complete the GOAL scholarship paperwork. Their concern has now shifted to whether they will be able to provide the same opportunity to their younger boys.

*Participants 4 and 5: Sebastián and Antonela*

**Biographical information.** Sebastián, 50, and Antonela, 48, were born in Sonora Michoacan, México. Sebastián's father owned a local grocery store, opening it after quitting medical school in the second year of residency. His mother, who only finished elementary school, was a stay-at-home mom. Antonela's father and mother both finished elementary school before going into the workforce. Her father was a truck driver, and her mother was a stay-at-home mom.

Sebastián has two brothers and two sisters. His siblings all work in white-collar jobs as doctors and lawyers. Antonela has two brothers; one is an architect, and the other is an engineer. Although they both described coming from poor families, Sebastián and Antonela both attended Catholic schools. The sacrifices that their parents made for them to be in Catholic schools was not lost on either of them. Both remember their childhood education. Sebastián recalls always being good in school and having great success. Antonela felt that she was an average student, always more focused on her friends more so than her studies. Sebastián recalls both of his parents inculcating the importance of doing well so that he could get a career. Antonela's parents, on the other hand, did not support her career aspirations, instead focusing on her likely role as a housewife. This was a sore spot for Antonela who wished that she would have been able to have a short career in some field. Another significant part of Sebastián's childhood experiences was having to work with his father, starting at the age of six. Sebastián recalled often being hungry and tired at school, closing the grocery store every night at 11:00 p.m. "We come from poor families, and they always tried to provide what we needed. I remember," said Sebastián, "sometimes all we had to eat every single day was beans, tortillas, and jalapenos because it was cheap." Working to support their family was inculcated in both

Sebastián and Antonela from an early age. This was something Sebastián and Antonela sought to keep their children from feeling the need to do during their schooling.

Sebastián and Antonela met at their local hospital where Sebastián was working as a medical doctor and Antonela was working at the front desk. Sebastián and Antonela got married in their mid-twenties. After getting married, they visited Georgia on their honeymoon. At that time Sebastián's sister was also living in Georgia. During their stay, Antonela got pregnant, and they remained in Georgia until their first child, a boy, was born. Following the birth, Sebastián and Antonela went back to their hometown before returning to Georgia before having their second child, another boy. This time, they decided that they would stay.

Sebastián began working as a truck driver, driving 18-wheelers, while Antonela focused on taking care of the children at home. Although it paid the bills, Sebastián quickly grew tired of his new job and decided to try to put his education in the medical field to work. Eventually Sebastián was hired as a medical assistant. In addition to the traditional responsibilities, Sebastián also serves Latinx patients who visit the medical office. After a half dozen years, Sebastián and Antonela welcomed their third child, this time a little girl.

When asked to describe their children Sebastián teared up and said, "they're amazing." At the time of the interviews, their two sons were in college, ages 20 and 19. One wants to be an engineer and the other desires to become a psychologist. Their daughter, who was a 13-year-old eighth grader at the time, has her goals set on becoming a surgeon. "They are good kids," said Sebastián, "they don't use drugs, they don't party…. they are still respectful."

All three of Sebastián and Antonela's children attended public schools. Their first two boys' earliest educational experiences in public schools were fine. They described their oldest as shy and said through the fifth grade he had supportive teachers. The middle son had some bad experiences with what Sebastián, and Antonela called bullying. Their daughter, as Sebastián and Antonela would tell anyone, is the strongest in terms of diligence toward her schooling.

Although satisfied with their children's public schooling, Sebastián and Antonela desired for their children to have a Catholic education as early as elementary school. As devout Catholics, Sebastián and Antonela did not like that their children were receiving no religious instruction other than at their Church. "They don't say anything about God, they don't pray for the food," said Sebastián. Those with whom they were closest were their fellow Latinx church parishioners, two of whom had already put their children in Catholic schooling and sang its praises. However, Catholic education remained a distant desire until a shocking event occurred at Sebastián's work.

When Sebastián and Antonela's sons were reaching the end of their elementary school career an elementary aged girl came to the clinic where Sebastián worked. When she came in, she was bleeding. The little girl told Sebastián that she had an abortion in the restroom of her public school. "That really impacted me, and I said to myself, this is the next school for my boys…no, no, we have to apply and pay whatever because they cannot go to that school." Sebastián and Antonela made a decision at that moment that they would not stop until their children were in Catholic education.

It was Catholic school or bust for Sebastián and Antonela. "We only researched for Catholic schools," said Sebastián. Sebastián and Antonela began their search by

contacting their kid's PreK-3 and PreK-4 classroom teachers, which was a standalone branch of one of the local Catholic schools. At the time Antonela worked there as a volunteer and she had a relationship with several of the educators and the building administration. The two aforementioned Latinx church parishioners, one a dentist from México and another a construction worker from México, mentioned their happiness with another local Catholic school that was about a 30-minute drive from Sebastián and Antonela's home. For Sebastián and Antonela, in addition to the school being a Catholic school, the school's proximity to home was important, which left a small handful of options.

Sebastián and Antonela's initial attempts to move their children were unsuccessful. They quickly realized that without significant financial aid, they could not afford it. However, Sebastián and Antonela were never able to make it to that step in the process as their children's applications kept getting rejected by several Catholic schools. When asked about the rejections Sebastián said, "I don't know why they rejected our applications for elementary school." Still, Sebastián and Antonela held out hope that one day their application would be accepted.

The rejection letters continued for Sebastián and Antonela. "We applied like five times to the elementary Catholic schools when the kids were in first grade, second grade, third grade, and we don't know why, but they reject." It was when their eldest son reached fifth grade that this hope became reality for Sebastián and Antonela. A dream was finally realized, but not quite, as "the tuition was half, and we couldn't pay that." So, again, they applied when their oldest son reached the sixth grade, and it was then that they were offered an acceptance and were told about the GOAL scholarship. "They

asked me for like 20 forms…but the front desk lady was Hispanic as well and she helped me a lot through the process and to send in all the forms," said Sebastián. Even though the application for the GOAL scholarship may have required a lot of documentation, Sebastián indicated that it was not that difficult and was well worth the effort for the significant financial assistance.

When asked about the role of finances in their decision to leave public education, Sebastián laughed and said, "It was a big role because I was looking at almost half of my salary going to tuition. I still drive a 1989 pickup…we have to hold the vacations…we have to hold new clothes." With the financial assistance from the GOAL scholarship, Sebastián and Antonela could afford the tuition. To make matters even easier, when Sebastián told his supervisor, his supervisor's response was to increase Sebastián's salary to help ensure he could cover the tuition. Finally, their dream became a reality.

**Experience(s) within a new school community.** Sebastián and Antonela have had good experiences since joining their children's new school community. Sebastián pointed to their children's academic accomplishments as central testament to their satisfaction. He recalled having to often help his children when they were in public schooling with their mathematics classwork. Since enrolling at the Catholic school, he has not had to help at all. He credits this with the Catholic school's focus on providing tutoring after school, and the difference in classroom size. Sebastián said, "…in the private school you have rooms with 20 students, 14 students, and the public school is over 30 students." Furthermore, Sebastián and Antonela point to their sons continuing to come back to the school now as alumni as an indication of how welcomed they were and the good experiences they had. "We feel happy that our kids are now in college, they are

good students, they are respectful, they are helpful with the family," said Sebastián. "Another family's kids stayed in public schools, and they are smoking, they quit college, they are working at McDonald's and different places, but they don't continue with their education."

Sebastián and Antonela name several other positive aspects that they felt were important to their children's new school experience. One aspect was their lunch program, which included healthier options than what Sebastián and Antonela had viewed in the public schools. "In the public schools, when they go to lunch, they provide chicken nuggets, some macaroni and cheese, and lots of carbs. In the private schools they have a salad, they have soups, they have all different foods, more healthy foods." Sports offerings were another strength in their eyes. Of course, the religious retreats and the mission-based aspects surrounding serving the poor were central to Sebastián and Antonela's satisfaction with their children's education.

When asked about their own sense of belonging within their new school community, Sebastián and Antonela reported feeling as if they were a part of the community. With school personnel, Sebastián and Antonela felt accepted. They indicated having maintained good communication with their children's teachers. "Even with the people who are the janitors, they are Hispanic, and we are friends with them as well." The previous principal was Latina and they mentioned her as being a very nice person.

Interestingly, the degree to which Sebastián and Antonela felt assimilation into the new educational community was not as strong as their children's. In respect to their own acclimation to the new community, Sebastián and Antonela indicated that their

relationships with other parents were not strong. Sebastián has a strong command of the English language. Antonela understands some English but is more comfortable corresponding in Spanish. Even when their eldest sons hang out with their friends and their friend's parents, Sebastián and Antonela remain at home. "We don't go with the parents because of our language," said Sebastián. This was not the case with other Latinx parents, where they share a language, and a church. "We're still friends because we are in the same church. So, if we don't see them at the school, we can meet at the church every Sunday…they have a party, they invite us, and we go to the party. We stay in touch with the Latinos."

**Personal reflections.** As Sebastián and Antonela reflected on their journey and what advice they would share with other Latinx parents, they expressed concern for other Latinx families, like some of their friends, who are compensated for their work in cash. "They can't show how much money they made," said Sebastián. Sebastián and Antonela asserted that they try to tell all their Latinx friends about the GOAL scholarship and the successes of their children that they attribute significantly to moving their children to Catholic education. "You are going to get a better future for your kids by moving them to a private school because you put the roots when they are kids and when they grow up, they don't have a problem with their life. When we talk about the education, we try to invite the people to apply. We tell them they have some help with the scholarships, but you have to apply." Sebastián and Antonela felt that the GOAL scholarship needed to be broadcast to a greater audience through mediums beside just word of mouth, a sentiment echoed by other families. Sebastián expressed additional concern with the literacy of some Latinx friends that he knows and how difficult it may be to navigate their way

through the GOAL scholarship process regardless of what language the documents are presented. "I know a lot of people that can't read or write in Spanish, and English is a hassle."

Reflecting on their own educational experiences, Sebastián and Antonela give their journey meaning in terms of trying to give their kids better educational experiences than they themselves had. Sebastián wanted to ensure his children never felt the stresses that he endured as a working minor and hopefully avoid some of the rougher roads that their cousins encountered such as early parenthood or struggling through entry-level jobs for their adult life.

*Participant 6: Gabriela*

**Biographical information.** Gabriela is a 53-year-old female. Gabriela was born and raised in Lima, Peru before moving to the United States. She was one of seven children born to her parents, whose ancestors were from the Basque region of Spain. Gabriela's father was a lawyer, and her mother was a stay-at-home mom.

Gabriela's educational experiences were in Catholic schools. Education was extremely important to her parents. She recalled that her parents wanted all of their children to complete high school and university educations. Her brothers and sisters mostly went on to careers in different fields including practicing law, banking, dentistry, and one joined the military. Tertiary education was not in the cards for Gabriela, as during high school she decided to join the Peruvian Navy and spent a total of six years in service. In the Navy, Gabriela began doing secretarial work but quickly picked up on the power of the computer and many new programs that were being developed. Although she excelled, females in the Peruvian Navy were only allowed to progress three ranks and

she found herself at a roadblock in her career. So, while still enlisted, she began working for a fire extinguisher company out of United States, in Wisconsin, that had a factory in Lima. Gabriela decided to leave the military just as the Peruvian government began a tumultuous period. The company she was working for offered her full-time employment working on computers.

Gabriela's family immigrated to the United States a little at a time over the course of a dozen years, first by her grandmother followed by her mother, the aunts and uncles, and finally Gabriela and her siblings. At the time, Gabriela was 21 years old. They first moved to New Jersey. The Wisconsin company agreed to allow Gabriela to work remotely. Gabriela and her family eventually settled in Georgia. In time she met someone and had her daughter. Eventually, the father and Gabriela went their separate ways and Gabriela supported her daughter and her mother as a single mom. She accepted a job at the local university before moving into graphic design and advertising. Eventually, as her daughter grew up, the jobs began to interfere with taking care of her daughter and she felt that her lack of English proficiency was holding her back. When she was interviewed, Gabriela worked as an Uber driver. At the time of this study, her daughter was 17 years old.

Gabriela's daughter attended their districted public school for pre-K through the fourth grade. Gabriela expressed content with her daughter's experiences at the public school, saying that the teachers were very demanding and worked well with the students. Missing were the Catholic aspects that Gabriela had grown accustomed to during her own educational experiences in Peru.

**Navigating school choice.** Gabriela was concerned as her daughter was getting ready to transition to middle school. Gabriela had heard through word of mouth that her districted middle school had behavioral problems. She also sought the smaller classroom settings that the Catholic school offered. In Gabriela's mind, with a smaller student-to-teacher ratio, those teachers would also have more time to dedicate attention to the students. Lastly, Gabriela sought the structure for which Catholic schools are so well known. With the move becoming more apparent, Gabriela's desire for her daughter to move to a local Catholic K-8 school grew stronger. The cost of private schooling was a major concern for Gabriela as she began navigating her options.

Gabriela did not consider other private high schools because a Catholic education was very important to her. There was only one Catholic K-8 school in her area, so her options were limited. The school was 15 minutes further in terms of driving distance. Gabriela had a cousin whose children attended the school, but it was a friend who connected her with a school principal, a Chilean female, to talk about private education. The principal talked to her about what financial aid options there were for families, and she mentioned the GRACE scholarship, which is another student scholarship organization (SSO), like GOAL, with which the Diocese partnered.

Gabriela completed the school application as well as a financial aid application through GRACE. Her daughter was accepted and, thanks to the Catholic parish discount and the financial assistance through GRACE, her daughter enrolled. In middle school, Gabriela's daughter was a little more outgoing because the small school setting allowed her to feel comfortable with a bigger group of friends.

**Experience(s) within a new school community.** When Gabriela was interviewed, her daughter was in the eleventh grade. This longevity with the Catholic school allowed Gabriela to reflect on her initial experiences as well as the school's growth. "Since the time that we've been there, I've noticed recently there's been better integration with Hispanic students. The school is holding more events, and we (the families) are collaborating more," said Gabriela. Blaming COVID, she said that the families did not get a chance to get to know one another until recently. She also acknowledged a hesitancy within the Latinx community at the school to attend because of their lack of English proficiency that impacts their ability to engage in conversation, and because many of them work multiple jobs. Gabriela said that she was trying to make a better effort now to attend more school events. She still seeks more community amongst the Latinx families saying, "I would like to see more events…Not just seeing each other at Sunday Mass, but rather events, where, at the school, people can share their experiences and share information about how to proceed with changing schools or with scholarship information with enrollment information, application information."

According to Gabriela, her daughter has "had some ups and downs, but it has generally been very positive." She expressed that she struggled socially in the larger school setting, compared to middle school. Her daughter was more timid and reserved in high school. Society and school's response to COVID-19, such as masking, social distancing, and general fear, did not help in terms of enabling friendships or allaying social anxiety. Academically, high school has also been more challenging. Many students face a difficult academic transition to high school, but her daughter also took on a more challenging course load through Advanced Placement (AP) classes. The

combination of social anxiety and academic challenge has caused her daughter to stress to the point of avoiding school altogether, but she has persevered to remain.

**Personal reflections.** Reflecting on the GOAL scholarship process, Gabriela said, “The information that they asked for; all the facts, and all the numbers and information is a lot. It took me two or three hours to complete the whole thing because it asked for so much personal information.” Still, she recommended that the process is worth it for her and said she tells other families that it is worth it for their children to get a better opportunity in their future.

Gabriela felt the school was getting better at getting information into the hands of Latinx families, saying, “The propagation of this information is very important.” The school had caught the attention of Gabriela and others at Church when the school provided pamphlets and brochures in Spanish. "It's still not enough,” said Gabriela, “because the Latino families are still not that well informed, even though the Catholic schools are trying, the word still needs to get out more about the opportunities. The perception is that to go to a private school is only for the people who are rich. I felt that way before I found out that there were scholarships and opportunities.” Gabriela says there must be more personal explanations than just brochures because, “people still believe that they can't afford it and don't have all the information.” She recommended that schools select a representative or Latinx families be asked to speak about their experiences in large settings like Mass. She asserted that Latinx Spanish-speaking families “…are afraid to ask questions because of the language barrier and they’re not only afraid to ask the questions but also afraid of what the answer might be. There’s a fear with the language barrier.”

Gabriela believed that the experience navigating through Georgia's school choice apparatus has been worthwhile. She is satisfied that her daughter has now been in Catholic education for almost a half-dozen years. She believed that the outcome for her daughter is going to be a good outcome, both morally and in terms of job prospects following college. She ended the interviews by saying that she still believes promulgation of information for the Latinx is key to helping the community attain the best outcomes for their children.

*Participant 7: Isabela*

**Biographical information.** Isabela is a 35-year-old female who was born in Guanajuato, México. She grew up within a small town ("rancho") of Salvatierra with her mom, dad, four sisters, and one brother. Her mother and father's education ended following the third grade, and the family did their best to make ends meet. While her father travelled back and forth finding work in the United States, her mother managed the home as Isabela and her siblings grew up. Isabela attended public schools in Salvatierra through the seventh grade. Thinking back on her experience through elementary and middle school, a residing memory was the perception of active class discrimination from teachers where students from families in higher socioeconomic classes were showered with favoritism while those who were economically disadvantaged, like Isabela, were treated as lesser. After nearly a half-dozen trips to Ciudad Juárez for immigration documentation, her family moved to the United States during her eighth-grade year.

Following a brief stay in Texas, her family moved to Georgia, where one of her sisters was already residing. While in high school, Isabela met her significant other. During her junior year, Isabela and he moved to another area of Georgia where she

finished high school. Isabela's high school experience was a struggle, academically, because she lacked English proficiency. She describes herself as an average student, but a very hard worker even to the point of reading her textbooks several times to try to grasp the English-only content. Although her proficiency increased over time, Isabela could not pass her graduation tests, which, at that time, were only offered in English. Knowing that she was pregnant at the time of graduation, Isabela was not deterred and had her sights on pushing herself "to do a little bit more than just high school."

A few years after the birth of her son, Isabela enrolled in a local state college and earned a medical assisting certificate. This made Isabela the first, and only person in her family to finish secondary schooling and to complete any form of tertiary education. Since then, Isabela has spent her career in different roles within the medical field. At the time of the interviews, Isabela and her high school sweetheart have two children, a boy, 14 years old, and a four-year-old girl. They are back to the area in Georgia where her parents and several siblings live. It is here that her experience navigating school choice began.

**Navigating school choice.** Like Gabriela, she enrolled her son in their districted public school starting in pre-K. She recalls that her son was academically about average, but he struggled due to a speech impediment. As he grew older the physical struggles became mental as well due to the increasing harassment from other students. Hearing his struggles and seeing his pain brought back tough memories for Isabela. "I was seeing myself with the things that were happening to him," she said. It was her son's fifth-grade year that spurred Isabela's search for an alternative educational setting for her son. Thus began Isabela's experience navigating Georgia's tax credit scholarship program.

Refusing to blame the teachers, Isabela simply believed that there were too many kids in the classrooms for one teacher to manage. She wanted her son to have a fresh start and desired an academic environment that could provide smaller student-to-teacher ratios. With no experience in private education, Isabela began her journey by seeking out advice from family, friends, and coworkers. Those friends shared their own experiences, which were overwhelmingly positive. It all sounded great, but for Isabela, the concern remained; how was she going to afford private schooling? After lengthy consideration, Isabela contacted two private schools that were in close proximity to her home. One school was an independent K-12, "academy" focused on a college preparatory curriculum. The other was a K-8 diocesan Catholic school associated with the church that Isabela attended. Isabela acknowledged that she had seen the flyers and weekly updates from the school, but "I never thought that my children would be able to go there because, you know, it's a private school and everybody knows that you have to pay."

When Isabela contacted each school, she was put in contact with the admissions personnel. She set up the in-person visits and had additional time to consider other qualities she sought beyond just a smaller student-to-teacher ratio. Isabela noted that proximity to her home and a safe learning environment were important. Isabela admitted that as a member of the Catholic Church, she began this search partial to the idea of sending her son to a Catholic school, but the visits and additional research would dictate which school she thought was best for her son. Nevertheless, tuition remained a deal breaker.

She and her son visited each school in person and when the topic of tuition and financial aid came up at the Catholic school, she was first informed of the financial aid

available through Georgia's Qualified Education Tax Credit (QETC) program. The funds came through a different student scholarship organization (SSO) that the Diocese partnered with called GRACE Scholars, Inc. She had no idea about the Georgia Qualified Education Tax Credit (QETC) nor about how the funds could possibly help her afford her son's education. Isabela was able to complete the GRACE paperwork thanks to the help of the Catholic middle school's admissions director. Isabela discussed the fear of navigating this process saying, "I was kind of thinking, 'Oh my God it was going be a lot of forms. They're not going to take my kid,' those type of things. But once you go and talk to the correct person, they will help you in that process." The financial aid award came back and was enough help that she was able to move her son to the Catholic school.

**Experience(s) within a new school community.** For Isabela's son the transition to the Catholic middle school was a challenge. Most of the students in his class had been together since pre-K and it took some time for him to fit in. At first the school recommended that her son reclassify as a fifth-grader due to his subpar transcript, but Isabela asked for him to start in the sixth grade and then reevaluate along the way. Immediately Isabela felt relief as her son was no longer complaining about the bullying and the teachers were much more communicative than Isabela's experience in public education. Tearing up as she described the change in her son after the three years in middle school, Isabela said her son was much happier and it showed in his academic achievement scores. When it came time to transition to high school, Isabela wanted her son to remain in Catholic education, and there was only one Catholic high school in her community.

The transition to the Catholic high school was simple. Isabela felt welcomed at a new parent social gathering. Isabela mentioned that at first, she was concerned that "they're not going to treat me the same because you know I'm getting the scholarships and all those types of things. But no, they actually made me feel welcome, and I can see that they make my child welcomed." She said the other families and school personnel have been very kind and communicative. She continued that she was apprehensive about how she may fit in as one of the few Latinx families, but she has not had any negative experiences.

Her son also felt at home since most of his peers transitioned with him. He was getting more involved, such as in athletics. He was also feeling some successes in terms of his grades. At the time of the interview, her son was only in the first semester of his first year, so Isabela acknowledged that there is still plenty of time to continue to evaluate his experiences at the new school.

**Personal reflections.** For Isabela, the process of navigating Georgia's school choice apparatus was a challenge, but worthwhile. Her only regret is that she did not explore an alternative educational setting for her son earlier. She expressed concern for those in the Latinx community who may not have proficiency in English. Living in the United States can be "kind of challenging sometimes. I would say for a Latina that doesn't know the language, it will be more challenging but with me, you know, I know English, so that kind of helped me out there." She also worried that those families may not be served as well as she was because the personnel that helped her navigate all the documentation required did not speak Spanish. Would non-native English speakers give up without the immense amount of assistance needed? Isabela is grateful that her church

is increasing the amount of information given to families and that information is in Spanish and English.

Isabela has witnessed some of her son's friends who remained in public education going adrift. She credits the move to Catholic schools for keeping him focused and believed that it is going to set him up for a good career in the future. She expressed contentment that "he'll be a good person, you know with a good heart and help others, which is very important." Isabela acknowledged that her own experiences seeing her parents struggle, being the first to graduate high school, all impacted her own desires for her children and the importance she placed on their education. She also credits her experience of having to apply for financial aid in college as a change in her own mind about the help that may be out there for people who do not have money.

### *Data Analysis*

To best capture the stories of Latinx parents in Georgia as they navigated the school choice options available to them, this study utilized narrative inquiry. Each participant shared their unique story. Following the interview, each audio or video recording was transcribed by using a professional transcription software online program called Transcribe by Wreally Studios. The auto transcription was never perfect, so a second time through was required. The data analysis began as soon as the first interview was transcribed. Thought experiments and memoing occurred concurrently as the interviews progressed as did comments in the margins of transcriptions as an early glimpse of themes began to be identified.

**Narrative analysis.** Patton (2015) best summarized what is sought for in narrative analysis: "The central idea of narrative analysis remains, that stories offer

especially translucent windows into cultural and social meanings when understood and analyzed as narratives (p. 128). Furthermore, the desire is to cultivate narrative imagination, which Nussbaum (1998) defines as "the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have" (as cited in Kim, 2016, p. 346). Narrative imagination was an important aspect to creating the participant narratives as well as during the analysis of their stories shared. How can someone understand another's experience(s) without first putting themselves in the shoes of those being studied? As a qualitative researcher, it is understood that a historical critique is to see qualitative research as less scientific. Qualitative researchers have contested that critique for decades arguing instead that the human aspect remains central to studying and understanding phenomena and human experience.

As I began "flirting" with different methods of narrative data analysis and interpretation, my focus remained on excavating the meaningful stories to (re)tell (Kim, 2016, pp. 320-21). The method of narrative analysis that appeared most logical for this study was Polkinghorne's narrative mode of analysis (also called "narrative analysis"). Kim (2016) added an additional type of paradigmatic analysis following Polkinghorne's lead, one that is "derived from a predetermined foci of one's study" (p. 335). This was employed to sort through the data to further identify categories and concepts. The study's focus on Latinx parents and their experiences navigating Georgia's school choice marketplace enabled some predetermined categories of exploration. These predetermined categories such as the characteristics the participants were looking for in a private school,

helped mold the research questions. Throughout the analysis of the semi-structured interview transcripts, the process of narrative analysis and the eventual coding were at the forefront.

### *Data Coding*

Saldaña (2016) describes a code in qualitative research as, "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 3). A semi-structured interview process was adopted to explore the experiences of the participants. A series of pre-scripted questions were drawn up to directly elicit answers to the study's research questions. Following the transcription of all interviews, the Microsoft Word documents were uploaded to MAXQDA. With the assistance of this qualitative and mixed-methods research software program, coding began.

Two cycles of coding were performed to work toward identifying the themes from the participant interviews. The first cycle of coding was in-vivo. This form of coding was desired to accurately capture the words and phrases of the participants in their own voices. The second cycle of coding was focused coding. This form of coding was used to narrow down major categories and themes to their essential elements within the framework of the study.

As Creswell and Creswell (2018) demonstrated, the codes fell within the three categories: expected codes, surprising codes, and codes of unusual or of conceptual interest. Expected codes is a "code on topics that readers would expect to find, based on the literature and common sense" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 278). Surprising codes is a "code on findings that are surprising and could not be anticipated before the study

began" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 278). Codes of unusual or of conceptual interests "code unusual ideas, and those that are, in and of themselves, of conceptual interest to readers" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 278).

In vivo coding captured the feelings, reflections, and recommendations of the participants through their own words. These words and phrases were then reexamined and lumped together into data clusters using focused coding. Those data clusters were then analyzed to illuminate the themes that were captured and expounded upon in the following section. Following the identification of the major themes, narrative analysis was employed to focus on weaving the participant's narratives with empathy in mind. With two cycles of coding completed, themes identified, and narrative analysis finished, the big picture was clear.

### *Themes Emerging from the Data*

Throughout the interviews, Latinx parents reflected on interview questions constructed based upon the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, as well as to directly answer the research questions. This critical narrative study explored the experiences of Latinx parents in Georgia as they navigated moving their child(ren) from a public school to the private school of their choice. To better understand the system in which these families are navigating Georgia's school choice marketplace, market theory, rational choice theory (RCT), and critical race theory (CRT) were employed.

Three themes were identified after copious review of the transcribed interview data, following the first two cycles of coding: in vivo and focused coding, as well as narrative analysis. Each theme was derived from the answers to interview questions focused on eliciting responses to the study's research questions. Understanding that

coding leads to themes, the themes from this study can also fit the categories of "expected," "surprising," and "unusual or of conceptual interest." Each theme is discussed along with supporting evidence from the interviews with the participants. It is important to understand that interview questions were designed to gain the participants' answers to the research questions. Thus, each presentation of each theme begins with the study's research question it addresses.

*Theme 1: Dissatisfaction with Public Education*

The first research question of this study was: How do Latinx parents describe the key factors that led them to participate in Georgia's tax credit scholarship program to enroll their child(ren) in a local private school instead of the traditional public school the student would otherwise attend? It should have been expected that the participants of this study were unhappy with their districted public school(s), which led to their consideration of private education. If school choice is considered to be akin to a marketplace, the consumers within that market are going to seek the producers that they believe offer the best product. Markets are not perfect and not all consumers are equal (more to be discussed in a later theme). All participants expressed what they perceived as a better educational opportunity for their child(ren). This should not come as a surprise since, to be considered a participant, the family already had to have made the transition to a private school of their choice. Negative rumors about their children's public schooling or personal experiences drove these families to seek out an educational alternative.

Georgia, like other states, has government accountability offices, in addition to the state's Department of Education, that publish districts' data for the general public. Out of the five families, all but one family lived within a school district that was given a

71 or below by the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2021). One family lived in a district that was given an 85. Two families lived in a district that was given a 71. Two families lived in a district that was given a 66.

The Governor's Office of Student Achievement retrieves data from the Georgia Department of Education and ranks each school and district on a 0-100 point scale. The number is then given a letter grade based upon a traditional grading scale with 0-59 being an "F", 60-69 being a "D", 70-79 being a "C", 80-89 being a "B", and 90-100 being an "A". This is what is known as the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI). The data which the Georgia Department of Education evaluates includes content mastery, progress, closing gaps, readiness, and graduation rates. Shifting from whatever parents hear about their districted public schools anecdotally, based upon the quantitative score of each participant's school district, their concerns appear to be justified.

What is important is why these Latinx parents became unhappy or were worried about what the future in their districted public schools may entail. Consistently, each family mentioned as an impetus to look elsewhere that their districted public school classroom dynamics caused them concern. Individually, participants also stated negative views of student behavior at their districted public school, an inability on the teachers' part to form meaningful relationships with their students, worry about their child(ren)'s academic future, and disappointment with a lack of any religious guidance (or morals).

**Behavior and other distractions.** For María, Sebastián and Antonela, Gabriela, and Isabela, the behaviors of the students in their districted public school caused concern.

Expressing what she was told by other parents, “you always have fights, always something like, you know, something that will always kind of grab at you…You worried about what happened, they fought and then the next day they come back.” Sebastián’s story of the elementary schooler who had an abortion in the school restroom was a final straw for him. Knowing that it was his sons’ next school, he remembered saying to Antonela, “no, no, we have to apply and pay whatever.”

Negative experiences dominated the participants’ worldview. Gabriela stated that she heard “that students were mischievous” and “as you get into middle school in the public school system, there’s behavioral problems, fights and things like that.” She felt strongly that is the difference between public and private schools, “there’s just a lot less distractions.” Isabela heard similar horror stories, “you know, fights in there and (students) out of control and they always talk about they have drugs and those type of things.” For two sets of the participants, they also had negative experiences while their children were enrolled at their districted public school.

A shared experience among three participants was bullying. Isabela, Sebastián, and Antonela spoke about the bullying that their children experienced. Speaking for their children, Sebastián stated that his middle son had gotten bullied “and we don’t like that, they bully the kids.” Isabela’s son also experienced what she saw as bullying of her son and her niece. Speaking for her son, she said, “he had a lot of people that used to make fun of him because of his speech.” Isabela’s niece also experienced significant harassment on the school bus ranging from hair pulling, name calling, and eventually another student putting gum in her niece’s hair. This disturbed her sister so much that her sister eventually succumbed to driving her daughter only after leaving a voicemail that

was unanswered by the school principal. "In a public school you are getting bullied," said Isabela.

**Academics.** For María, Sebastián and Antonela, Gabriela, and Isabela, academics were the top concern as they considered leaving their districted public schools. As María evaluated what high school her son would attend, she said, "…public school settings, academics wise, their graduation rates are not, you know, very good." Sebastián explained his early dissatisfaction with his children's public school education saying, "I remember that in the public school, after school, I have to sit down with my kids and explain some concepts about math. They don't know how to do fractions. They do not know how to do some geometry." Sebastián indicated that since changing to Catholic education, he has never had to tutor his children. Isabela said that academics was a key concern of hers stating, "…the private schools, they have higher standards regarding academics."

Specifically, public school classroom sizes and the ability for teachers to make meaningful relationships played a key role for most of the participants. "The public school system is so much different because you have so many kids and their focus can't fully be on, you know, one person and that's understandable," said María. María worried that her son would get lost in public schools "with nobody behind him as far as the faculty and stuff like that. So that's why we decided to go with a smaller setting, you know, more interaction with their teachers and stuff like that." Gabriela said, "There's just too many students in the public schools." "Because the schools are smaller, the teachers can dedicate a lot more time and attention to the students," exclaiming that is why she is a fan of private education, said Gabriela. "It's a smaller group and students

are more motivated." The ongoing perception is that public schools are overflowing with students and that is taking away from the academic achievement of those students.

"In the private school, you have rooms with 20 students, 14 students, and the public school has over 30 students. So, the teacher can't do that (offer tutoring) in the public schools," said Sebastián. Talking about the public school teachers, Isabela said, "You can tell they're overwhelmed when you call…you can tell that it takes too much time to take, to be taken care of. They (private schools) have less children in the classroom than the public schools."

Participants like Isabela were quick to defend public school teachers saying, "…that's too many kids, you know, for teachers, for the staffing. It's just hard to deal with." Each participant, in their own way, was quick to clarify that they were not saying that public education is bad, just that the classroom and/or school dynamics led to their dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction led to worry. The worry led them to seek out an alternative that they were not even sure was attainable.

**Religion.** Religious instruction was important to all the participants, in different ways. That is not to say that it was the participants' number one qualm with public education, but it did play a role in their decision-making. All the participants of this study were Catholic. This was not a required criterion of participation, although it was expected as all participants are Catholic school Latinx parents. That is not to indicate that all Latinx parents are Catholic or that all Latinx Catholic school parents are Catholic; it is just more probable given that recent studies indicate that a majority of America's Latinx population still subscribes to Catholicism, yet that number is shrinking year over year (Funk & Martínez, 2014).

In discussing the factors that led him and his wife to seek to leave public education, Sebastián cited religion as the one of the two major factors. He said, "we are Catholics and in the public school, they never talk about that. They don't say anything about God, they don't pray for the food. They perform religious retreats that you can't find in public schools. They go do missions with the poor people, giving some food on Saturdays. You can't find that in the public schools." Similarly, Gabriela stated, "I wanted a private Catholic school for my daughter." Fernando and Daniela, whose son led his own search for Catholic education, indicated that their Catholicism did play a role in their decision to allow him to pursue a private education.

*Theme 2: Challenge(s) With the GOAL Scholarship*

The second research question of this study was: What are the experiences of Latinx parents in receiving and maintaining their child's voucher for initial and continued enrollment in private school? When discussing with the participants the process they had to navigate to procure financial assistance, participants in this study found the process through the GOAL scholarship as cumbersome. None of the participants recalled any additional requirements to continue to receive scholarship funds other than maintaining their enrollment (such as good grades and good conduct). It is important to remember that GOAL Scholarship Inc. allows each school to use its own financial aid process but does give guidance on award amounts. Understandably, GOAL Scholarship Inc. does not want to get entangled in each private school's financial aid process, and the lack of universality likely adds to confusion in some organizations. This lack of clarity is likely exacerbated when non-English speaking Latinx parents seek admittance and financial assistance and are left to navigate the process with documents in English only or systems

that are not easily converted to Spanish. The process is a very important component to the use of any good, and if it is too complicated, this may lead people to seek an alternative. In order to successfully navigate a process, one has to know that there is a process to navigate in the first place.

Knowledge of GOAL scholarship (and other student scholarship organization provided aid) is the primary challenge facing Latinx parents. None of the participants was aware of the financial aid enabled through Georgia's Qualified Education Expense Tax Credit legislation before embarking on this journey. Every participant of the study cited the importance of promulgating this program to their community members. The first place they often looked to was their local parish Catholic church. Isabela said to "put it in the Churches or get more, maybe flyers about where is the scholarship in both of the languages, English and Spanish." Gabriela felt it was the Church's responsibility to "…get information about the affordability of private education." She went further stating that she thought there should be a designated person to speak about the program "because people still believe that they can't afford it and don't have all the information." "We need this because it's good stuff," said Sebastián. He finished by arguing that the program needs to have better marketing through the churches or on TV.

Many participants commented on the number of documents required to receive financial assistance. "They would ask for stuff that I didn't have," said María. "The paperwork was a lot," said Fernando and Daniela, "it took a couple of months." Sebastián lamented that "They asked for like 20 forms. It took me two or three hours to complete the whole thing because it asked for so much personal information. In the application they ask a lot of questions that I didn't have the immediate answer to." For

the participants, this was the first time they were asked to provide so much documentation for something of this magnitude.

"It was things I either didn't have or that I did not quite understand what they were looking for," said Gabriela. Many of the requested documents sound similar to those required for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). For many people who attended college, the FAFSA application was a great deal of stress. One can only imagine how it might feel trying to complete a FAFSA in a second language.

When asked about their reflections or recommendations as the participants had successfully navigated their school's scholarship process, a majority of the participants indicated a concern for other Latinx families who may struggle with the application process even more than they did. The concerns were about the use of English-only documents through the financial aid process, the possibility of not being able to procure certain financial documents being requested, and even literacy in English or Spanish.

Fernando said, "It can be difficult for those who don't speak English, because the papers are, at least the ones we saw, in English." Sebastián expressed additional concern that other Latinx people he knows may be able to speak the languages but cannot read in those languages. "So, if they can't read it in Spanish, it is easy for them to quit applying because they don't understand what they are reading." Echoing concern for a language barrier, Gabriela stated, "You know Latin American Spanish-speaking families are afraid to ask questions because of the language barrier. They're not only afraid to ask the questions but also afraid of what the answer might be. There's a fear with the language barrier." All the participants mentioned being helped through the process by the school's

financial aid personnel, but Isabela cautioned, “If they don’t know the language, they need to find an interpreter.”

An additional concern posed by Sebastián was his friends who worked jobs that only paid for in cash. These friends would be, in his eyes, declined from receiving financial assistance from the GOAL scholarship. “He can’t prove his income because they pay only cash to him. I remember that was a challenge for his family,” said Sebastián. Lamenting his friends’ lack of options, knowing that an income tax form was a requirement, Sebastián believed his friends’ children were permanently stuck in their districted public schools.

At María’s school, I asked her to navigate this process as a prospective parent. When I asked the personnel overseeing financial aid if there was a Spanish translation of the online application, she said that she was not aware of a Spanish version. As a millennial, who is computer literate, I found that hard to believe and attempted to find a translation button in multiple locations to no avail. I was then contacted later by the personnel member saying that she dug deeper and found the button. Although a little more content, if I had trouble finding it as a computer literate, English-speaking, college-educated, White American, millennial, how likely is it that someone going through this process for the first time, in a secondary language, is going to find it? Barriers like these will be discussed in the final theme.

*Theme 3: Latinx Choices in Georgia’s School Marketplace*

The third research question for this study pertained to the decisions of the Latinx parents as they were investigating their child(ren)’s potential private educational landing place. Market theory and rational choice theory were employed as part of the theoretical

framework of this study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) asserted that theoretical frameworks advance "an abstract and formalized set of assumptions to guide the design and conduct the research" (p. 278). One of the assumptions of market theory is that adding a market component to public education will lead to the best outcomes for all participants in the educational market. Closely tied with market theory is rational choice theory, which asserts that the consumer faces a known set of alternative choices. What has been or will be demonstrated through the four themes is that the educational marketplace is not a perfect market for myriad reasons, not the least of which deals with the implicit and explicit discrimination of the study's participants and the members of their community. What will also be demonstrated is that parents cannot make rational choices, especially when they do not have an appropriate awareness of essential aspects of the market.

The most important aspect to the decision of the participants was cost. The code "Cost/Tuition/Financial Aid" was cited more than double the next closest reason. This is expected as the Latinx parents that were participants were those who needed financial aid, from the GOAL scholarship, to even consider private education as an option for their child. María described the financial aid as "a big part" of her son's ability to attend their local Catholic school. "The financial aid definitely was the stamp on the envelope and when we go that, it was over…Without the financial aid, I'm not sure we would have (been able to enroll)," she finished. Daniela described the tough conversation she had with her son saying that she told him "That his ability to attend the school really just depended on the amount of help that we could get in terms of financial aid." Sebastián exclaimed, "It was a big role because almost half of my salary was to tuitions." Isabela

said that cost was a worry at first saying, “I’m gonna try and see if I’m able to enroll my child in the private school. You kind of accept that he’s gonna not be able to go due to the financial situation.” All the participants expressed sincere gratitude and surprise at how much aid they were given.

**Academics.** Next to cost, the participants in this study cited academics as a central reason for selecting their child(ren)’s private school. Whether it was to escape future academic worries, in terms of classroom experiences, or to seek a more challenging academic environment, academics were a primary reason that the participants sought an alternative to their child(ren)’s districted public school. Although academic standards were automatically assumed to be stronger in the Catholic schools by the participants, they all mentioned academic aspects to their decision-making.

María mentioned that as she did some of her own research, looking for graduation rates and how each school was “going to give you a better chance at getting into a good college.” Isabela noted that she felt “the private schools have higher standards regarding academics.” Sebastián and Antonela said that “academics was the first consideration” for their decision. Fernando and Daniela had the same statement for their son. Gabriela described her daughter’s transition to Catholic education as academically “going up a level.”

Whether or not each Catholic school had demonstrated the perceived academic prowess was not quantitatively demonstrated by any of the participants. From the interviews, however, it was clear that after considering what a private education would cost, all the participants believed that academics was what they were paying for. Sebastián and Antonela credited their Catholic school as setting the foundation for their

eldest son's academic success in college. Gabriela asserted that her daughter "changing schools and moving on to better and more challenging scenarios is going to help her when she transitions to college." Reflecting on her son's transition, Isabela felt she made a good choice saying, "he is already talking about that he wants to go to college and get a good career."

**Religion.** An interesting part of the decision-making process for the participants was selecting a Catholic school as their child(ren)'s private educational setting. Interesting is the term used because, although it did not rise to the top in terms of coding as cost and academics did, it was a key aspect to their decision. All seven participants were "cradle Catholics," which is a common term used to identify those baptized into the Catholic Church at birth (versus "converts" who come the Catholic Church at a later stage in life). With that being said, other than Sebastián and Antonela, who gave two religious-based answers as to why they sought a Catholic school, none of the participants expounded upon the Catholic aspects of schooling that they were either disappointed in not being present in public education or were seeking in a Catholic school.

During the interviews and following data analysis, Catholic education appeared to be both an expected outcome while also not serving as a driving force in the decision making. It is somewhat paradoxical. As stated earlier, Sebastián and Antonela said, "We only researched for Catholic schools." Fernando and Daniela said, "the Catholic school was an easier choice." Gabriela stated that "I wanted a Catholic school for my daughter." Isabela said, "It's (the school) Catholic and we are Catholic so that was important." María, who considered the most private schooling options with her son, did not even mention Catholic education as an important quality, yet does mention her pleasure with

him “learning more about the Catholic religion.” When asked if the private school being Catholic played a role in their decision, every participant acknowledged that it was.

**Whose decision is it?** Beginning this study, the question of who would make the child(ren)’s educational decisions was not even considered as an aspect of how Latinx parents in Georgia may be navigating school choice. It was only following the interviews and data analysis that an unexpected aspect to the decision-making process appeared. Who is making the decision? Within this study, it was such a strong assumption that in every instance the parent(s) would have made the decision that it was not a built-in interview question. It was expected that as the child(ren) got older, their voice may be heard to a greater degree, nevertheless the decision would remain the parents’. That assumption was incorrect.

Universally, the Latinx parents who navigated Georgia’s school choice marketplace during their child(ren)’s elementary or middle school made the decision as to what future school their child(ren) would attend. Interestingly, the two sets of Latinx parents whose child(ren) made the transition following the completion of middle school indicated that their son took ownership of the decision (María and Fernando and Daniela). Both sets of participants’ interviews presented what Sattin-Bajaj (2015) asserted, “Latino immigrant parents did not believe it was in their purview as parents to oversee or even participate in their high school children’s school choice decisions, instead trusting their children to do so ‘with minimal oversight’ because they were confident in their children’s ability to make the best decision about which school to attend” (as cited Mavrogordato & Harris, 2017, p. 804).

Although only Fernando and Daniela are considered Latinx "immigrants" by Sattin-Bajaj's (2015) standard, María, a first-generation American, demonstrated the same level of trust in her son. When asked "who took the responsibility for making the final decision?" María stated that, "He made the final decision." Fernando and Daniela pointed out that it was their son who initiated the entire school choice process and "it was principally our son who investigated everything." This may be a greater theme, were a future study to investigate only Latinx parents whose child(ren) made the transition going into or during high school.

*Theme 4: No Regrets*

Satisfaction with their choice to move their child(ren) from their districted public school to their local Catholic school was universal among all participants. Two of the participants mentioned how they felt the outbreak of COVID-19 impacted negatively just how quickly they and their child(ren) acclimated to the new community. Nevertheless, the participants reported overwhelmingly that their child was happy and they themselves feel as though they are a part of their Catholic school community.

The most repeated feeling was that their child was becoming a better person. María described her son's move as "a major, major move in his life." She went on to clarify that she was not just speaking about education, "but, you know, spiritual-wise, religion-wise." Sebastián and Antonela described their children as being formed in their Catholic school resulting in them being "good students, they are respectful, and they are helpful with the family." Looking at her son today and picturing him as he grows at their Catholic school, Isabela described her son as becoming "a good person, you know, with a good heart, who will help others, which is very important."

Once in the community, the participants also felt welcomed. A big part of their feeling of inclusion were parent events. Fernando and Daniela held that "the first year was a little rough (COVID), but now yes, we feel very much like we belong." Gabriela acknowledged that "I feel like I am integrating better and making a better effort. I feel better going to some of the events, not only with Latino parents, but also with all of the students." María said about her school that "you don't feel like you're outside." Having had multiple children go through their local Catholic school, Sebastián and Antonela warmly stated, "We feel like we have been there for our whole life."

*Theme 5: Continued Aspects of Community Cultural Wealth*

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) argued that "critical race methodology in education offers a way to understand the experiences of people of color along the educational pipeline" (p. 36). We have now gotten a glimpse of these families' journeys as they are attempting to navigate their child(ren)'s educational pipeline. As a critical narrative, interview data was evaluated for glimpses of community cultural wealth, to which there were several aspects. The participants of this study, as members of a non-dominant group within the United States, faced challenges within a system that knowingly or unknowingly gives advantage to members of the dominant groups (ethnically and socioeconomically). For those who know the history of private education, this should not come as a surprise as private education, most especially in the Southeastern United States, was not created with these participants and their child(ren) in mind.

As demonstrated by Gándara (2010), the Latinx community faces triple segregation in the United States of America. Although other members of non-dominant groups also face racial and socioeconomic segregation, the segregation that the Latinx

population also uniquely faces is linguistic. This most especially pertains to the experiences of Latinx families in relation to educational achievement outcomes. The lack of positive outcomes, due to this discrimination, leads to negative consequences for the individual student, the family, and ultimately the Latinx community and our society as a whole.

Notably, several forms of what Tara Yosso (2005b) considered communities of color's cultural wealth were effervescent during the entirety of the interviews. The forms of capital that stood out following the analysis of the interview data were aspirational capital, social capital, navigational capital, and linguistic capital.

**Aspirational Capital.** Yosso (2005b) defined aspirational capital as "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (p. 77). The participants of this study dreamed of a better future for their child(ren) as they looked beyond their present circumstances. The most pressing objective means to obtain what they considered their child(ren)'s best future was the liquidity to afford a private school education. Their drive to meet their aspirations for their children led to where we found them for this study, obtaining what they perceived as a better future.

All the participants in this study demonstrated aspirational capital in various ways. The most obvious pertaining to seeking out what they perceived as their child(ren)'s best education, hopefully, in their eyes, leading to future prosperity in the form of a good career. In other ways, the participants sacrificed their hopes, aspirations, and dreams for their child(ren). Sebastián remained in the United States knowing that he was sacrificing his career as a medical doctor back home in México. Gabriela began

working as an Uber driver so that she was able to "be more responsible and attentive" to her daughter. A few of the participants mentioned their ongoing belief in the United States as a country of opportunity. María described herself navigating through her son's schooling options as her trying to "…have like that American life" and impart to her son "the American dream." Fernando and Daniela described the United States as "a country of your dreams." In reflecting on her own experiences, Isabela stated that she always kept her children in mind and "tried to do the best I can for my children."

It is clear the participants see themselves as attempting to live the "American Dream" by seeking to set their child(ren) up with a better opportunity in life than they themselves had.

**Social Capital.** Yosso (2005b) defined social capital as the "networks of people and community resources" that "provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions" (p. 79). Education is one of society's most crucial institutions for the purpose of individual development and general society's wellbeing. The history of people of color and education in the United States is rife with barriers to their existence, entry, and overall societal advancement.

Due to historical injustice, people of color have had to utilize and rely on social capital to navigate much of society. Nevertheless, because private education, especially in the Southeastern United States, began without the Latinx community in mind, there is likely a smaller percentage of family and friends to assist one another as they navigate private education. This is especially true with a relatively new legislative effort, like Georgia's Qualified Education Expense Credit, aimed at providing financial resources to enroll one's child(ren) in private education.

Pérez and McDonough (2008) found "parents, extended family members, and trusted individuals are invaluable resources" for Latinx students attempting to navigate the college admissions process. Furthermore, Pérez and McDonough (2008) found "weak networks and little access to resources will give Latina/o students fewer choices" (p. 261). Prior to the massive uptick in school choice options for families in the United States, college was the first time that families had to grapple with a potentially life-changing process. Today, the same may be said for primary and secondary education. Similar educational outcomes with little or no choices, may be the outcome of Latinx families who are seeking to navigate school choice options with little social capital to rely upon.

Reflecting on how her experience navigating school choice also reflects on her life as a Latina parent in the United States, María lamented how many within the Latinx community "don't have people around them to talk to them and tell them, this is an opportunity…this is a door opener." Having limited experience(s) being shared within a community may lead to less fruitful outcomes for Latinx families. Sebastián answered the same question by saying, "Well, at a certain point, you feel like you've been discriminated [against]." Sebastián was expressing a feeling of isolation as a Latino parent. His focus was on the disadvantage he felt not being able to speak English fluently had on his own experiences.

**Navigational Capital.** Navigating school choice can be a challenging enterprise for Latinx families as they have to move their way through applications, entrance exams, financial aid documents, and other structures that explicitly or implicitly deny opportunities. Yosso (2005b) defined navigational capital as "skills of maneuvering

through social institutions" that were "not created with Communities of Color in mind" (p. 80). Each participant in the study utilized this form of capital to navigate their way through Georgia's school choice market to land in a private school. Navigational capital consists of the individual, family, and community strategies, characteristics, and agency that are used to negotiate the educational system (Arellano & Padilla, 1996, as cited in Mavrogordato and Harris, 2017, p. 806). The participants of this study cited the help of other Latinx parents, assistance of school personnel, and English proficiency as forms of navigational capital that helped them successfully navigate their way into and through Georgia's complex school choice options.

Isabela, Gabriela, and Sebastián and Antonela all mentioned their local Catholic Church as being a central location for Latinx families to share their experiences with one another and for the dissemination of information about the financial aid provided by Georgia's Qualified Education Tax Credit scholarship program. Knowing that Catholic Church is often a place for fellowship, it follows that the social capital used to navigate society's institutions, in this case education, may be widely shared among parishioners.

**Linguistic capital.** Yosso (2005b) defined linguistic capital as "the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" (p. 78). The participants had to navigate life within the United States for many years prior to their experiences navigating school choice. For each participant, proficiency in the English language was seen as a necessary characteristic to successfully navigate Georgia's school choice options. Sebastián described his experience as "…hard because I have to learn more about this language." Isabela described navigating school choice as "…challenging sometimes. I would say for a Latina that doesn't know the

language, it will be more challenging, but, with me, I know English, so that kind of helped me out there." Even those participants not proficient in English, like Gabriela, worried that without the information being translated into Spanish that other Latinx families would be left behind. As immigrants, Fernando and Daniela had a history of navigational capital to find success in the United States. For instance, to navigate school choice, they had to rely on their son and friends because "It can be difficult for those who don't speak English."

As demonstrated by Thorsos, Martínez, and Gabriel (2020), American schools and society have historically devalued any primary language other than English. This theme demonstrates a continuation of the implicit/explicit supremacy of the English language felt by the Latinx community as recounted by Martínez (2020). Experiencing the privilege given to the English language will eventually lead to internalized oppression among the Latinx community as demonstrated by Padilla (2001). Six out of seven participants spoke English as a second language (with varying degrees of proficiency). Regardless of the degree of English proficiency, they all overcame this inherent barrier that they likely face in so many aspects of their daily life. It was through the use of several forms of capital that they were able to successfully navigate Georgia's school choice marketplace. For their sake, and for the sake of future Latinx families, hopefully the need to rely upon community cultural wealth to attain similar outcomes as the dominant group in the United States is soon to be a product of the past.

### *Conclusions*

Chapter four is arguably the most important chapter as it allows the researcher to demonstrate the findings of the study. Following the buildup in laying bare what the

body of literature indicated, prior to the study, and sharing the thought process behind the methodology, the results are here. This critical narrative produced data demonstrating how Latinx parents are navigating Georgia's school choice marketplace. Furthermore, by using the voices of these Latinx parents, this chapter held true to providing a platform for their voices to be heard and for their lived experiences to be seen.

The stories of the participants have commonalities, especially their shared desire to seek out what they considered the best education they could reasonably find for their child(ren). There also existed differences between them: María, Fernando, Daniela, Sebastián, Antonela, and Isabela are of Mexican descent. Gabriela is of Peruvian descent. María, Fernando, Daniela, Sebastián, Antonela, and Isabela are all two-parent households. Gabriela is providing for her daughter as the head of a single-parent household. Sebastián and Antonela, Fernando and Daniela, and Gabriela were satisfied with defaulting to their local Catholic school as *the* (emphasis added) option for their child(ren)'s future enrollment. María and Isabela were the only two participants that sought out more schools as options in addition to their local Catholic school. As the decision had to be made on enrollment, only Fernando and Daniela and María allowed their child to make the final decision. Sebastián and Antonela, Gabriela, and Isabela made the final decision of their child(ren)'s enrollment.

# Chapter V

# DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## *Introduction*

This final chapter begins with a summative discussion of the findings gained through the pursuit of answers to the research questions posed. The goal of this critical narrative study was to bring to light the experiences of Latinx parents as they navigate Georgia's private school choice initiative enabled through the Qualified Education Tax Credit program legislation. Following the summary of findings is a brief discussion, the implications of the findings for policy makers, and recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with final thoughts.

## *Summary of Findings*

This study began by using purposeful sampling to select the participants. These participants had to be at Catholic schools, which participated with Georgia GOAL Scholarship Inc., as their student scholarship organization (SSO) to provide financial assistance for their families. Using Seidman's (2013) three-interview structure, the participants in this study illuminated their experiences navigating Georgia's school choice marketplace. Although each participant's story demonstrates unique aspects to their own experience(s), commonalities existed among all participants. Those commonalities were evaluated against and with the study's theoretical framework in mind, which included market theory, rational choice theory, and Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit). The themes that came out of the interviews were identified and

explained, using their own words (in vivo) and expounded upon by the researcher (focused coding).

The emergent themes provided an overview of what the participants' experience(s) were as they navigated Georgia's school choice marketplace. The first identified theme was that all of the participants believed that their child(ren) could not remain in their districted public school for a variety of reasons (Theme 1: Dissatisfaction with Public Education). A second theme was that all the participants were challenged to varying degrees by the documentation and process required of them to receive GOAL scholarship funds (Theme 2: Challenge(s) with the GOAL Scholarship). A third theme was that the participants of this study sought a Catholic education, which in their minds, provided a more structured learning environment, smaller classes, a focus on academics, and religious instruction (Theme 3: Latinx Choices in Georgia's School Marketplace). A fourth theme was their universal satisfaction with their decision to leave their districted public school and with their landing spot at their local Catholic school (Theme 4: No Regrets). The final theme was the participants demonstrated ongoing aspects of Tara Yosso's (2005b) community cultural wealth, which was needed to successfully navigate Georgia's school choice marketplace (Theme 5: Continued aspects of Community Cultural Wealth).

A theoretical framework encapsulated this study. A primary theory for this study was Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit). As people from a non-dominant group within the United States, it was proposed that LatCrit was applicable. What was found through the interviews were continued instances of barriers to the participants' entry into private education. In the face of perceived and real barriers, these families resorted to aspects of

what Tara Yosso (2005b) described as community cultural wealth which is "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contact possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (p. 77). Within community cultural wealth are six forms of capital. The participants within this study universally demonstrated four of the six. They demonstrated aspirational capital as they sought to maintain and strive for a better future in the face of barriers. They demonstrated social capital as they relied on networks of family, friends, coworkers, and school personnel to transition their child(ren)'s enrollment from their districted public school(s) to attaining a private education. They demonstrated navigational capital as they meticulously worked their way through a societal institution not created with them in mind. Lastly, six out of seven participants, who spoke English as a second language, demonstrated linguistic capital as they successfully navigated their way through a cumbersome financial aid process (in addition to other school-required paperwork and documentation for their child(ren)'s admittance).

Two economic theories were employed to understand the essential dynamics of this study. The first was market theory. Market theory is the belief that inserting competition into a market, in this case education, will create more efficient, lower cost, options for the consumer. In this study, the consumers were the Latinx parents that served as participants. A significant focus was placed on how these parents navigated the educational market created by Georgia elected officials well over a dozen years ago. With that being said, the educational market has been shown to not be a perfect market. For instance, in the state of Georgia, Catholic schools are not found in many areas thus for many Latinx families a desired option may not be available in their area. This limited

market access for non-dominant peoples is supported in the findings of Mavrogordato and Stein (2016) as well as Simms and Talbert (2019).

The second economics-based theory employed was rational choice theory (RCT). Rational choice theory was employed to underscore the behaviors of the participants in their choices as they moved their child(ren) from their districted public school to a private school of their choice (in this case their local Catholic school). The Latinx participants were acting in what they believed to be the best interest of their child(ren). They were acting as rational actors with a known set of alternatives to their child(ren)'s districted public school. Because so much of their "feelings" about their child(ren)'s districted public school(s) were testimonial, their decisions may not be considered rational by some.

This study had four research questions that served as the guiding light of all decisions executed during this study. A summary of the findings is presented below each research question in this section. The findings, in some instances, corroborate what has been seen within the current body of literature. In other areas, the findings add to the dearth of research on the topic of school choice and Latinx parents.

**Research Question 1.** *How do Latinx parents describe the key factors that led them to participate in Georgia's tax credit scholarship program to enroll their child(ren) in a local private school instead of the traditional public school the student would otherwise attend?*

In the simplest sense, why did these participants decide to leave their districted public school? Georgia's Qualified Educational Expense Tax Credit Scholarship program is barely a decade old, thus many Georgia residents are likely unaware that this

option is available to their family. Furthermore, Catholic schooling options, as sought out by the study's participants, are not available in many parts of the state.

All the Latinx families sought an alternative educational environment for their child(ren) instead of continuing to attend their districted public school(s). The prevailing theme was a concern with overcrowding in terms of the overall student enrollment and in terms of the student-to-teacher ratio in the classroom. This overcrowding, in the parents' eyes, leads to classroom disruptions and negative social behaviors. This overcrowding, again in the parents' eyes, also leads to less investment on the behalf of the teacher for each student. In summation, this all leads to less of an academic environment within the public educational system.

**Research Question 2.** *What are the experiences of Latinx parents in receiving and maintaining their child's voucher for initial and continued enrollment in private school?*

The participants of this study were only able to make the transition to their local Catholic school due to the financial assistance from the GOAL scholarship. Their experience(s) not only give us a glimpse of what they endured to receive the funding, but also give us an opportunity to evaluate how the process may be impacting other Latinx families around Georgia.

One commonality among all participants was their child(ren)'s enrollment at a Catholic school thanks to the GOAL Scholarship. The first hurdle in the process for these families was even being aware that the program was available. Every participant found out about the GOAL scholarship (or GRACE Scholarship for those who enrolled in a diocesan school first) from school personnel. It was not that they began seeking out a private education after hearing about the program, it was just a matter of luck that they

reached out to a school that participated. Even once told about the availability of funds, the Latinx parents interviewed all mentioned some sort of struggle during their application process. Although each school is responsible for its own financial aid process, there were commonalities expressed among the participants.

Two concerns were most often mentioned after having navigated the process themselves. First was the actual application and the difficulty navigating the process if it was offered in English only. This was a major source of struggle for many of the participants and was a universal concern expressed as the participants were asked to reflect on the process with other Latinx families in mind. Another struggle was finding and providing all the documentation required to receive the funds. For these participants, they were able to locate and provide the documentation, but a concern remained for other Latinx families who may not be able to easily locate the documents or, in more extreme circumstances, may not have the documents due to the cash-only nature of their job(s).

**Research Question 3.** *On what do Latinx parents base their decision of schooling for their child's private school of choice?*

There are over 26 student scholarship organizations (SSOs) that receive funds from Georgia's Qualified Education Tax Credit program to provide financial assistance to K-12 students who are moving from a public to private school. These SSOs provide financial assistance to many different private schools, not just Catholic schools. The participants in this study were purposefully selected after being identified as Catholic school parents. Learning what schools these Latinx families entertained for their child(ren) was an important aspect as well as what characteristics they were looking for in the school of their choice. The participants were overwhelmingly concerned with the

cost to attend either their local Catholic school or as they evaluated the differences between multiple private schools. Next to cost was the perception that the private school of their choice was more academically inclined than their districted public school. Of course, with the participants having been identified at Catholic schools, as Catholic people, religious instruction was also an important component.

**Research Question 4.** *What are the experiences of Latinx parents who successfully navigated Georgia's tax credit scholarship program once their child is enrolled in a private school?*

Across the board, all the participants were satisfied with their child(ren)'s move from their districted public school to their local Catholic school. Their child(ren) was/were flourishing in their new environments.

Similarly, the participants felt accepted into the community. As Latinx parents now in the Catholic school community, no one mentioned feeling ostracized.

### *Discussion*

In everything we do, we seek people who have experience. If you are going on a trip, you may search the internet for "the best (fill in the blank)" in that area or seek the recommendations of others prior to travelling to that location. Before you purchase something from Amazon, you scroll down to read the reviews. Navigating parenthood, in this case one's child(ren)'s education is no different. In this study, the stories of five Latinx families who have navigated Georgia's school choice options for their child(ren) were investigated. Although their experience(s) are key to filling in an acknowledged gap in the research, it is their advice to other Latinx parents, as they reflect upon their own experience(s), that is the next piece to this puzzle. Because private education, to a

large degree, was created without this community and non-dominant group members in mind, it is the advice of these families that needs to be shared.

Academia and elected officials must guard against any tendency to think in the ethereal. As academics we look at previous research, we study theories, and propose further studies to enlighten our understanding of topics. Elected officials too often seek to score political points for their base and to sell programs and policy as red meat to their constituents. We must not forget about the people being studied or the people who are impacted by the decisions of elected representatives. Thoughts and ideas, policies and regulations, it all boils down to real world implications. There are families, and in this case children, whose lives are directly impacted.

The narrative of each participant gave a glimpse of what school choice looks like for Latinx parents who are navigating the school marketplace created by elected officials from decades past. These are real people, Americans, who are actively working their hardest to provide the best opportunities for their children with intergenerational prosperity in mind. These Latinx parents do not care about economic theories, political speeches, or partisan politics. They care about their family and, as demonstrated through each of their narratives, their own parents sacrificed themselves, their hopes, dreams, and aspirations, so that one day their grandchildren, the participants' children, may have a life they could never dream of.

### *Implications for Policy Makers*

This paper remains neutral in policy matters regarding the appropriateness of school choice in Georgia. With that being said, elected representatives have debated Georgia's educational system and decided to enable a broader educational marketplace

for *all* (emphasis added) their citizenry. With equity in mind, which is surely the desire of all elected representatives, what is clear is that the Latinx population faces continued barriers to their entry into the marketplace that members of the dominant group may not. These barriers are likely resulting in outcomes that only exacerbate their existence within the United States of America.

It is in the purview of elected representatives on how programs, enacted through legislation, are or are not meeting the needs of *all* of their constituents. As demonstrated through this study, the Latinx community is largely unaware of the financial assistance entitled to them through the student scholarship organizations (SSOs) as recipients of funds flowing through Georgia's Qualified Educational Expense Tax Credit. Knowledge of this program is crucial as several of the participants mentioned the perceived reality, among themselves and their community, is that private education is only for the rich. How many Latinx families worry for their child(ren)'s future and yet feel hopeless in the face of socioeconomic discrimination? In addition to socioeconomic discrimination, sizeable segments of the Latinx population face linguistic discrimination.

This study corroborates previous research that Latinx parents are struggling with English-only documentation, and English proficiency is impacting their participation in school choice (Bohon, Macpherson, & Atiles, 2005; Joseph et al., 2017; Mavrorgato & Harris, 2017). The United States is a nation without an official language. Linguistic discrimination should not happen as Spanish far exceeds other non-English languages spoken in American households, accounting for almost 62% of foreign language speakers and quantitatively by close to 30 million people (Deshmukh, 2021).

### *Limitations of the Study*

Patton (2015) implored researchers to "be open and clear about a study's limitations" (p. 308). Although significant efforts have been taken to improve the credibility of this study, there are several factors that pose as limitations: the use of purposeful sampling, the small sample size, the localized nature of the study, as well as the selected form of qualitative inquiry framework, narrative inquiry.

For this study, nonprobability sampling was executed. Purposeful sampling (also called "purposeful selection") was the chosen method to select research participants. This method was intended to ensure that those who could provide answers to the research questions and fulfill the research goals were selected as research participants. Quantitatively minded researchers will find fault with convenience sampling as probability sampling is considered the gold standard of research. To best understand the experiences of Latinx parents as they navigate school choice initiatives across the United States, quantitative studies are needed to complement the findings within this study to provide a complete picture. Future researchers are encouraged to extend the findings of this study with an eye toward providing the most representative sample through quantitative research methods.

In addition to the nonprobability sampling, the sample size of seven participants may not be considered representative of the Latinx population. The profile of those within the sample may also be considered a limitation as the Latinx parents interviewed were those who chose a Catholic school for their child(ren). Other Latinx parents may have chosen other forms of private schools such as non-denominational or protestant Christian schools. Future research should focus on those families as well to determine if

there are different criteria sought by those who select Catholic schools versus other types of private schools.

This study was conducted in the state of Georgia. The school choice programs enacted in other states may not reflect the same aspects of the program in Georgia. Similarly, other choice programs that families may navigate in Georgia were not considered. Latinx parents may have chosen those forms of school choice for their child(ren). The experiences of those families were not investigated.

The lack of research devoted to examining how Latinx parents navigate the private school choice movement serves as a limitation. There are studies that address other school choice measures, such as charter schools and inter-district open enrollment, but none that address tax-credit scholarships. This study sought to fill this void. It is my hope that future researchers can make extrapolations from this study to assist in their own respective research.

### *Recommendations for Future Research*

There is a gap in the research pertaining to Latinx families and their participation in school choice for their children (Gooden et al., 2016; Mavrogordato & Harris, 2017; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015; Taylor Haynes, Phillips, & Goldring, 2010). This critical narrative study sought to fill a very small gap in this identified research omission. This study was created to examine the experiences of Latinx parents navigating Georgia's tax credit scholarship program. This study is only one drop of water in a five-gallon bucket. There are many different aspects to school choice as a topic of study that, when combined with Latinx participants, still need to be pursued.

All forms of research are needed to expand our understanding of this research topic. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies would each add a different lens enabling researchers, policy makers, and educators to evaluate current practices. As a qualitative study, the desire was to add a depth of understanding as a starting point by highlighting a small handful of Latinx families and by illuminating the private school choice option enacted by Georgia legislators. Adding quantitative or mixed-methods studies would enable researchers to better apply the findings, in terms of external validity, to other subjects, settings, and treatments.

Future research should seek to illuminate the different economic, social, political, geographical, and linguistic factors that may add to our understanding of how Latinx families are continuing to navigate Georgia's school marketplace. Within each aspect, there are significant gradations and differences. By focusing on socioeconomic aspects, researchers may learn how wealthier Latinx parents may navigate school choice for their child(ren) differently than those from a lower socioeconomic bracket. By disaggregating who is currently combined into the "Latinx" community, differences may be identified in how those of Mexican heritage may navigate school choice differently than those with Peruvian heritage or those with Puerto Rican heritage. By focusing on geographical differences, researchers can identify how Latinx parents from metropolitan areas may navigate school choice options differently than those in rural or suburban areas. Lastly, by focusing on the experiences of first or second-generation Latinx peoples, we may identify a difference in how they navigate school choice as non-English language learners versus immigrant parents. Any one of these differences or a combination of these

characteristics may change our understanding of how Latinx parents are navigating their school choice options.

Future research topics should include Latinx parents who have navigated the educational marketplace and have remained in public education. Did they remain by choice, by market dynamics, or something else? Research also needs to be completed on Catholic Latinx parents who have entered the marketplace and chose a non-Catholic private school option, with a Catholic option available. Research needs to be completed on non-Catholic Latinx parents to see how, if any way, they differ in exploring private school options.

It does fall to researchers, not pundits or politicians, to evaluate in a multitude of ways if school choice is leading to better outcomes for Latinx families vis-à-vis their child(ren). It is one thing to identify how Latinx families are navigating school choice based upon a myriad of descriptors. It is another thing to evaluate if school choice is quantifiably enhancing the outcomes of the Latinx population. For those seeking a quantifiable way to evaluate Georgia's tax-credit scholarship, documenting the academic achievement of the Latinx students who use this scholarship may illuminate whether the outcomes realized are favorable or not for this community. This scholarship will also illuminate the veracity of neoliberal philosophies as it pertains to applying market theory dynamics to the American educational system. Furthermore, the successes or failures of rational choice theory, in relation to the impact of race within the United States, will also be clarified.

Additionally, it would behoove the research community to compare and contrast school choice initiatives across the laboratories of democracy to identify positive and

negative attributes of each. Lastly, to truly better the American society, researchers must honestly evaluate whether the neoliberal school choice movement is having more positive outcomes than have been attained during the past half-century of public education.

### *Conclusion*

This research study questioned whether the narrative surrounding non-dominant participation in the neoliberal school marketplace was as good as it was being sold. It is accepted that education can have a powerful, transformational impact on students. What has been identified is that Latinx families are struggling navigating the apparatus set up to enable a larger school marketplace. Georgia's Qualified Education Tax Credit program was created to assist families for whom private schools were inaccessible due to cost (Suitts, 2011, p. 8). As demonstrated by the interview data, for this mission to come to realization, barriers to communities, like the Latinx community, must be dismantled.

Citing Lincoln (1993), Solórzano and Yosso (2002) assert that "Critical race theory challenges traditional methodologies because it requires us to develop 'theories of social transformation wherein knowledge is generated specifically for the purpose of addressing and ameliorating conditions of oppression, poverty, or deprivation' (p. 36). This critical narrative study was executed to address and ameliorate the conditions facing Latinx parents in Georgia as they attempt to navigate the educational marketplace to better their child(ren)'s educational and life outcomes. Thanks to their participation, we now can hear their voices through their words as active participants in Georgia's school choice marketplace. Each of these families seeks what we all consider the "American Dream:" to leave their children in a better situation than they themselves had. With the knowledge of their dissatisfaction with their districted public school(s), and the challenge

that they have had to take part in an institution created without them in mind, we can and must do better.

I began this exploration based upon my work experiences, bearing witness to Georgia's tax-credit scholarship program's introduction and evolution over the past decade and a half. Although Georgia's program has continued to expand since its inception, it is clear that the Latinx community needs advocates. With a lack of adequate political representation, those advocates will have to arise from critical theorists outside of Georgia's political structure, as only one percent of Georgia legislators identify as belonging to the Latinx community (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020). As Georgia's Latinx population grows, their voices must be sought.

Through the lens of market theory, Georgia's elected representatives enacted a tax-credit scholarship program. Through the lens of critical race theory, they must evaluate its implementation and educational outcomes. Over time, advocacy may very well become activism, to ensure that the Latinx community is no longer neglected at the ballot box or within academia. Future advocacy must happen in every facet of the educational system. In a micro sense, this opportunity is within the walls of each private educational setting. At board meetings, faculty meetings, and in teachers' lounges, critical educators must challenge the dominant narrative. In the macro sense, two forms of advocacy are necessary: (1) direct advocacy to legislative representatives and informal policy makers, such as student scholarship organization (SSO) leaders; (2) we must advocate for teacher preparation programs to better prepare educators to support our culturally and linguistically diverse students (CLD) and families as they navigate

education, and to a greater degree, American institutions created without them in mind (Gabriel, Martínez, & Obiakor, 2015; Suriel, 2016).

Just as Aguirre (2000) opined on how the implementation of affirmative action programs in academia can have the opposite effects of the initial intent, the same parallels exist in terms of believing tax-credit scholarship programs inherently serve non-dominant and dominant families equally. The findings of this study have demonstrated that equity in outcomes is not being recognized by the Latinx community, and, at the very least, that there are obstacles to their participation. We have learned that what may appear to be non-biased on its surface, may still have biased outcomes due to the greater systems in which social programs are enacted within the United States of America. Policy cannot be evaluated based upon face value; rather, it must be evaluated in light of the documented experiences and outcomes of *all* peoples. We can and must do better to ensure that American ideals of equality are more than just abstract ideas written on paper or empty words of politicians seeking (re)election.

Critical pedagogy calls for provocation and challenge to the dominant narratives that are then used to maintain the systems which support those in power. Giroux (2011) implored critical theorists to grapple with "for what purpose and to what ends do certain forms endure and what promise or peril do they hold for future generations" (p. 14). Critical discourse will lead to a better understanding of the systems in which we operate. Methodologically, it is through testimonios, like those captured within this study, that serve as an activist practice within this discourse on educational policy (Urrieta & Villenas, 2013). Critical theorists like myself must use our privileges to confront the unfortunate realities of race neutral educational policies that so often lead to unequal

outcomes for People of Color (Urrieta, 2006). It is our collective responsibility to move our educational apparatus "from agents of oppression to agents in service of liberation" (Zamudio, Rios, & Jaime, 2008, p. 216).

Although one may look at the conclusion as the end of one's research study, this is not the end. Clandinin (2013) best summarizes the journey taken during this research study: "Of course, for narrative inquirers, exit is never a final exit. We continue to carry long-term relational responsibilities for participants, for ourselves, and for the work we have done together…narrative inquiry always begins and ends in the midst of ongoing experiences" (p. 44). The Latinx families who were given a platform for their voices to be heard and experiences to be seen are not exiting. On the contrary, their role in ongoing research is growing. In this sense, critical researchers like me, and many others will continue to shine a brighter light on this community, one so bright that they can no longer be ignored.

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# APPENDIX A:

## Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval Letter

***Institutional Review Board (IRB)***
***For the Protection of Human Research Participants***

## PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

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**Protocol Number:** 04194-2021 **Responsible Researcher(s):** Jacob Tyler Horne

**Supervising Faculty:** Dr. Regina Suriel

**Project Title:** *Critical Narrative Study of Latinx Parents' Experiences Navigating Georgia's Tax Credit Scholarship Program.*

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**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:**

This research protocol is **Exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption **Category 2.** You may begin your research study. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research.

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**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:**

- *Upon completion of the research study collected data must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed. If applicable, Pseudonym lists are to be kept in a separate secure file from corresponding name lists., email addresses, etc.*
- *Exempt protocol guidelines **permit** the recording of interviews provided the recording is made for the sole purpose of creating an accurate transcript. Upon creation of the transcript the recorded interview must be immediately deleted from all devices. Recordings are not to be collected, shared, or stored.*
- *The research consent statement must be read aloud to each participant at the start of each interview session. The reading of the statement, confirmation of understanding, and willingness to participate must be included in the recording and documented in the transcript.*

☒ ***If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.***

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*Elizabeth Ann Olphie* *07.09.2021*
Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator

***Thank you for submitting an IRB application.***
***Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.***

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*Revised: 06.02.16*

# APPENDIX B:

Recruitment Flyer

# Latina/o Parents Needed
# Se necesitan padres Latinos

## Research/Investigar

### COMPENSATION!
### ¡COMPENSACIÓN!

To compensate you for your time, I will make a $100 donation to your child(ren)'s school account.

Para compensarlo por su tiempo, haré una donación de $100 a la cuenta de la escuela de su (s) hijo (s).

### • Purpose/Propósito

To make known how Latina/o parents are navigating school choice in Georgia.

Dar a conocer cómo los padres latinos están navegando la elección de escuelas en Georgia.

### • Your experience matters!
### ¡Tu experiencia nos importa!

Your shared experiences will help researchers, policy makers, and ultimately other Latina/o families.

Sus experiencias compartidas ayudarán a el investigador y ostros profesores, legisladores y, en fin, a otras familias latinas.

### • What is asked of me?
### ¿Qué se pregunta de mí?

You are asked to sit for three separate interviews during the first semester. Interviews may be completed in English or Spanish.

Se le pide que participe en tres diferentes entrevistas durante el primer semestre del año. Las entrevistas pueden realizarse en inglés o español.

## Who am I?/¿Quién soy?

My name is Jacob Horne. I am a graduate student at Valdosta State University. I am also the Principal at a Catholic High School in Savannah, GA.

Mi nombre es Jacob Horne. Soy un estudiante de posgrado en la Universidad de Valdosta State. También soy el director de una escuela secundaria católica en Savannah, GA.

*Researcher university email

*Researcher cell phone

## WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?
## ¿QUIÉN PUEDE PARTICIPAR?

Latina/o parents who have used the GOAL Scholarship to move their child(ren) to Benedictine Military School from their districted public school.

Padres latinos que han utilizado la Beca GOAL para trasladar a sus hijos a Benedictine Military School de la escuela pública de su distrito.

## Confidential/Confidencial

Your interview will be kept confidential. This research is being completed at three different schools. Each parent and school will be given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity.

Su entrevista se mantendrá confidencial. Esta investigación se está completando en tres escuelas diferentes con varios padres. A cada padre y escuela se le dará un seudónimo (un nombre falso) )para garantizar que su nombre y identidad sean anónimos.

**Information Contacts**: Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to me, Jacob Horne, at 912-220-4976 or at jhorne@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

Contactos de información: Las preguntas sobre el propósito o los procedimientos de la investigación deben dirigirse a mí, Jacob Horne, al 912-220-4976 o al jhorne@valdosta.edu. Este estudio ha sido aprobado por la Junta de Revisión Institucional de la Universidad de Valdosta State (IRB) para la Protección de los Participantes en Investigación Humana. El IRB, un comité universitario establecido por la ley federal, es responsable de proteger los derechos y el bienestar de los participantes de la investigación. Si tiene inquietudes o preguntas sobre sus derechos como participante de la investigación, puede comunicarse con el Administrador del IRB al 229-253-2947 o irb@valdosta.edu.

# APPENDIX C:

## Participant Interview Timeline

*Participants Interview Timeline*

| **Pseudonym** | **Interview One** | **Interview Two** | **Interview Three** |
|---|---|---|---|
| María | October 2021 | November 20201 | December 2021 |
| Fernando and Daniela | October 2021 | November 2021 | December 2021 |
| Sebastián and Antonela | October 2021 | October 2021 | December 2021 |
| Gabriela | September 2021 | October 2021 | December 2021 |
| Isabela | September 2021 | November 2021 | December 2021 |

# APPENDIX D:

## Interview One Guide: Focused Life History

Topic 1: Establish Participant Background

- Tell me about yourself.
    - Establish that she/he is a Latina/o parent. Spouse that is not present?
    - What is your family background? Spouse?
    - What do you do as an occupation? Spouse?
        - What types of occupations have you had up until today?
    - How did you find yourself in this area?
- Tell me about your family growing up.
    - Who was your family unit?
    - Describe the home where you grew up?
    - What occupation(s) did your guardian(s)/parent(s) have?
    - What was his/her/their highest level of educational attainment?
    - What about his/her siblings? (same as above)
    - Were there any other family members that made a lasting impact on his/her education?
- What was it like growing up in your community?
    - Describe the community.
    - What were the career/life goals of your closest friends?
        - How did the community impact those aspirations?
- Tell me about how your parents/guardians felt about education.
    - Did one take a stronger interest/involvement in his/her education?
- Tell me about your earliest educational experiences.

    - Describe the schools you attended (Elementary, middle, high school).
        - Public school? Catholic school?
    - When you think about each school, what comes to mind?
    - Does he/she feel that he/she was generally successful in school?
- What experiences in school do you reflect most fondly upon?
- What experiences in school do you wish to forget?
- How did your childhood and adult experiences shape your beliefs about education for your child(ren)?

Topic 2: Establish their conception(s) about their child(ren)

- How would you describe your son(s)/daughter(s)?
- Tell me about your earliest recollections about your son(s)/daughter(s) and their education.
- Tell me about how your own educational experiences relate or were counter to your child(ren)'s.
- Explain to me how you see your role in your child(ren)'s education.
- Explain to me how you see the schools' role in your child(ren)'s education.

# APPENDIX E:

## Interview Two Guide: The Details of Experience

Topic 3: Transition to Private School

- Tell me about your child(ren)'s public school experience.
    - What schools (elementary, middle, high) and what ages (or through what grade)?
- Elaborate upon the factors that led you to decide to move your child(ren) from their districted public school to a private school.
- Describe for me the process that you (or both of you) went through as you debated pursuing a different educational setting.
    - Describe for me the role of your child(ren) in this process.
    - Who took responsibility for making this decision?
- Were there any other people (family, friends, co-workers, etc.) who assisted in the decision to transition out of your districted public school?
    - If so, what was their role?
    - Are there any positive or negative experiences that you had with friends or family as you were making the decision to leave your child(ren)'s districted public school?
    - Have any relationships changed since your child(ren) made the transition to the new school?
- How did you conduct your research into each private school?
    - Did you seek print materials (flyers/pamphlets)?
    - Did you seek online materials?
        - The schools' website?
    - A school ranking website that provides reviews? Word of mouth?

- What private schools did you consider?
    - Did you visit the school, in-person?
- On what school qualities were you basing your child(ren)'s enrollment?
    - Academics?
    - Location? Transportation? Convenience?
    - Safety?
    - Cost?
    - School environment?
    - Demographics? Were you aware of other Latina/o families?
    - Religion?
    - Were there any factors that you hoped to avoid?
- Who was your first contact at the private school?
    - Who was the most helpful? Why?
- What stands out in your memory about why you chose the school your child(ren) currently attend?
- Reflecting on your decision making, were there specific resources that helped?
- Reflecting on this experience, what, if any, challenges did you face as a Latina/o family?

Topic 4: Experience attaining and maintaining GOAL Scholarship

- What role did finances play in your decision to leave public schooling?
- What role did finances play in your decision to select your child(ren)'s current school?

- How did you become aware of the GOAL scholarship program?
- Describe for me the entire process that you embarked upon to receive financial assistance (the GOAL Scholarship) from your student scholarship organization (SSO).
- What, if any, challenges were there for you in the process?
- Are there challenges within the process that you believe may challenge other Latina/o parents?
- What, if any requirements, are made to continue receiving the GOAL Scholarship?

Topic 4: Experience Since Arrival

- Describe for me your experience at your new school.
    - How is this experience different than what you experienced at your child(ren)'s districted public school?
    - How has this new experience changed you as a parent(s)?
    - Were there any worries/challenges/setbacks in your acclimation to the new school community?
- How would you describe your relationship with other parents? What about Latinx parents? School personnel?
- Describe for me your child(ren)'s experience at your new school.
    - How is this experience different than what he/she/they experienced at your child(ren)'s districted public school?
    - How has this new experience changed them as a student(s)?

    - Were there any worries/challenges/setbacks in your child(ren)'s acclimation to the new school community?
- How would you describe your child(ren)'s relationship with other students? Latinx students? School personnel?
- To what degree do you feel a sense of belonging at this new school? Please give examples that informed that feeling.
- What are your conversations with friends and family about your child(ren)'s experience(s) at this new school?
- Have your experiences met your expectations when you first embarked upon this journey?
- What advice would you give to other Latina/o parents considering transitioning their child(ren) out of their districted public school?

Closing Question(s):

- Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your or your child(ren)'s experience during your transition from your child(ren)'s districted public school to this private school?

# APPENDIX F:

## Interview Three Guide: Reflection on the Meaning

- Ask for clarification to any questions from the previous interview.
- Given what you said in our previous interviews, how do you explain/reflect upon your experience of moving your child(ren) from public to private schools with assistance from the GOAL scholarship?
- Reflecting on the reason(s) you gave as the impetus for you to begin to seek an alternative educational setting for your child(ren), how do you foresee this change in school setting impacting your child(ren) in the future?
- Given what you have reconstructed in these interviews, what advice do you have for other parents in the Latinx community as they evaluate whether school choice is an option for their own family?
- Given what you said about your own childhood and the educational values your parents had, how do you see this experience as being shaped by your own childhood?
- After navigating the GOAL scholarship, what advice would you give other Latina/o parents?
- Now that you've reflected on your education and the path you've taken for your child(ren)'s education, what does school choice mean to you?
- Given your experiences navigating school choice for your child(ren), how does your experience reflect your life as a Latinx parent in the United States?
- What does it mean to be a Latina/o parent in Georgia, navigating school choice for your child(ren)?
- In what ways, if any, has your family changed since navigating school choice in Georgia?

- In what ways do you foresee this journey, changing your child(ren)?
- If you could go back in time, what, if anything, would you change about your journey navigating school choice in Georgia?
- What elements, if any, can the GOAL scholarship or school choice in Georgia be improved or changed to the benefit of Latina/o families?
- Reflecting on your experience, were there any challenges that you would hope other Latina/o families may avoid?
- Is there anything that you would like to add that has not been addressed?

# APPENDIX G:

## Participants' Pseudonyms and Demographics

*Participants Pseudonym & Information*

| **Pseudonym** | **Background Information** |
|---|---|
| María | Female (32); American of Mexican descent; married; dropped out in 11th grade; four children |
| Fernando and Daniela | Male (41) and female (39); Mexican; married; high school education; three children |
| Sebastián and Antonela | Male (50) and female (48); Mexican; married; one completed graduate school, the other completed high school; three children |
| Gabriela | Female (53); Peruvian; single; high school education; one child |
| Isabela | Female (35); Mexican; married; associate degree; two children |