School Choice or Schools’ Choice? Managing in an Era of Accountability

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Abstract
Drawing on a year and a half of ethnographic research in three New York City small high schools, this study examines the role of the school in managing school choice and asks what social processes are associated with principals’ disparate approaches. Although district policy did not allow principals to select students based on their performance, two of the three schools in this study circumvented these rules to recruit and retain a population that would meet local accountability targets. This article brings together sensemaking and social network theories to offer a theoretical account of schools’ management of choice in an era of accountability. In doing so, the author demonstrates that principals’ sensemaking about the accountability and choice systems occurred within the interorganizational networks in which they were embedded and was strongly conditioned by their own professional biographies and worldviews. Principals’ networks offered access to resources that could be activated to make sense of the accountability and choice systems. How principals perceived accountability and choice policies influenced whether they activated their social networks for assistance in strategically managing the choice process, as well as how they made sense of advice available to them through these networks. Once activated, principals’ networks provided uneven access to instrumental and expressive resources. Taken together, these results suggest that schools respond to accountability and choice plans in varied ways that are not simply a function of their short-term incentives.

Keywords
school choice, accountability, principals, social networks

School choice has played a central role in American education policy debates for the past three decades. Numerous choice policies have been implemented, including open enrollment plans, magnet schools, vouchers, and charter schools. At the same time, federal, state, and local policy makers have turned to quantitative performance indicators to hold schools accountable for students’ performance. The No Child Left Behind Act explicitly couples these policies, enabling parents whose children attend “failing” schools to use these indicators to identify the best schools for their children. How school choice and accountability policies may interact at the school level, however, remains an open question.

To date, American studies of school choice have focused on the family, rather than the school, as the agent empowered with choice (Bast and Walberg 2004; Bifulco, Ladd, and Ross 2007; Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore 1982; Coleman, Schiller, and Schneider 1993; Cullen, Jacob, and

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Levitt 2001; Hastings, Kane, and Staiger 2005; Hastings, Van Weelden, and Weinstein 2007; Holme 2002; Lankford, Lee, and Wyckoff 1995; Lauen 2007; Lee 1993; Lee, Croninger, and Smith 1994; Schneider and Buckley 2002; Wells and Crain 1992). However, scholars examining choice outside of the United States have considered the agency of the school. These scholars contend that schools competing in an educational marketplace seek students who will enhance their test scores and reputations (Ball 1994, 2003; Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995; Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995; Whitty, Power, and Halpin 1998). Students who disproportionately demand additional resources, such as special needs students, English language learners, or students with behavior problems, are avoided through both “overt and covert” means (Bartlett and Le Grand 1993; Gillborn and Youdell 2000; West and Hind 2003). To attract and select the population most advantageous to the school, English schools have engaged in targeted marketing, taken advantage of nebulous language in national admissions guidelines to select higher achieving students, and interviewed both parents and students in order to evaluate applicants’ desirability (Ball et al. 1995; Gewirtz et al. 1995; Hesketh and Knight 1998; Macguire, Ball, and Maccrae 1999, 2001; West, Hind, and Pennell 2003). Even after the point of selection, the need to compete in the marketplace has affected student retention; school exclusions, especially for minority children, have increased rapidly in the United Kingdom (Vuilliamy and Webb 2000). “Unofficial exclusions,” through which students are encouraged to transfer to another school, have also risen (Blyth and Milner 1996; Parffrey 1994; Stirling 1996). A number of authors have suggested that exclusions help maintain a market reputation of being “tough on discipline” while removing students perceived to pull down test scores (Bridges 1994; Gillborn 1996). While the educational values of head teachers have mediated their management of admissions and retention, scholars have argued that head teachers find themselves increasingly constrained by the demands of the marketplace, with their educational values pitted against the strategies necessary to succeed in the market (Ball 1994; Gewirtz et al. 1995; Gillborn and Youdell 2000).

Taken together, these studies have made important contributions to our knowledge of the distributional impacts of school choice policies. However, they leave unaddressed the social processes associated with schools’ potentially variable responses to choice policies and thus perpetuate a black-box theory of organizational responses to incentives. This gap in the literature is surprising because studies of accountability systems have established substantial variability in schools’ and teachers’ responses. It is possible that some schools act vigorously to shape their student populations, while others may not. The question, then, is what social processes contribute to these disparate organizational responses. As education policy makers increasingly introduce incentives to alter educational actors’ behaviors, achieving a better understanding of this variation is crucial.

This article draws on 17 months of ethnographic data collection at three newly founded New York City small high schools. Students must choose to attend these schools, but the city Department of Education does not permit these schools to screen applicants on academic or affective characteristics. In what follows, I will address two research questions:

1. Do schools of choice actively shape the types of students that attend and persist in their schools?
2. What social processes are associated with principals’ divergent responses to the school choice system?

In answering these questions, this article builds on existing research to offer a sociological theory of schools’ management of choice in an era of accountability.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: INCENTIVES IN ORGANIZATIONS

A tremendous body of literature, primarily by economists, has examined how schools respond to accountability incentives. While some studies have investigated whether accountability systems increase student achievement (Carnoy and Loeb 2002; Hanushek and Raymond 2004; Jacob 2005), the majority of studies focuses on strategic behavior that creates the illusion of improvement, sometimes referred to as “gaming the system.” These studies address a diverse range of gaming activities, including classifying students as special
education (Figlio and Getzler 2002; Jacob 2005), exempting students from tests (Cullen and Reback 2006; Jacob 2005), focusing on marginal or “bubble” students (Booher-Jennings 2005; Neal and Schanzenbach 2007; Reback 2008), suspending low-scoring students close to the test date (Figlio 2005), and changing the focus of instruction (Jacob 2005, 2007).

Sociologists have informed this literature by questioning whether all organizational actors perceive and react to the organizational environment similarly (Coburn 2001, 2005, 2006; Diamond 2007; Spillane et al. 2002). Drawing on sensemaking theory (Weick 1969), these authors take seriously the possibility that organizational actors both within and between organizations construct the demands of, and appropriate responses to, accountability systems differently. As a result, schools respond in varied ways that are not simply a function of their short-term incentives. According to these scholars, organizational actors cognitively struggle to make sense of the environment, filter different signals, and make choices in the context of these perceived opportunities and constraints. Rather than assuming that signals exist in the environment and are waiting there for principals to read, sensemaking theorists investigate how particular cues are selected as relevant while other cues are ignored. These scholars contend that human actors do not react to the environment but instead enact it. The enactment process is grounded in professional biographies and the social contexts in which sensemakers are embedded. As organizational actors decide which information is relevant and place this information in the context of their own experiences and beliefs, they develop a set of understandings about how the world outside of their organizations works (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978).

This literature does not view teachers as atomized actors, and it argues that intraorganizational networks matter (Coburn 2001). While studies have addressed sensemaking in teacher professional communities (Coburn 2001) and the role of the principal in influencing teachers’ sensemaking (Coburn 2005), only one study has examined the sensemaking of principals themselves. Spillane et al. (2002), examining responses to accountability in Chicago, argued that school leaders’ sensemaking is influenced by their professional biographies, the unique histories of the schools in which they work, and their roles as intermediaries between the district and teachers. While Spillane et al. noted that principals’ relationships with other principals were important to sensemaking, the role of principals’ own social networks was largely unexplored.

Building on the extant literature, I contend that principals enact the organizational environment (Weick 1969)—in other words, they diagnose the demands, possibilities, and constraints of the environment—by engaging in “collective sensemaking” in conversation with their colleagues (Coburn 2001). In this case, the actors constructing the environmental demands (the accountability environment) and opportunities (the school choice process) are administrators. The principal is charged with monitoring the school’s overall performance and occupies a unique structural position within the school organization. The principal generally serves as the primary point of contact with the school district, and information about the local accountability environment remains lodged in this role. Principals, then, have little to gain by making sense of these indicators with teachers, since teachers are disconnected from the administrative apparatus of the district. Drawing on social network theories, I argue that principals’ sensemaking about the accountability and choice systems occurs within the interorganizational networks in which they are embedded and is strongly conditioned by their own professional biographies and worldviews.

In this study, principals’ interorganizational networks were an outgrowth of their own professional biographies, work histories, and the varying pathways through which they founded their schools. Principals founding their schools as mom-and-pop organizations were firmly grounded in a geographic community, and their networks consisted of dyadic ties with local educators, ties that were generated not by their educational philosophies but by their shared work experiences in the same schools. Principals founding their schools as part of a franchise were embedded in a dense, socially closed network of franchise principals; these ties flowed not from geography, their work histories, or their educational views but from their collective investment in the franchise enterprise. Principals founding their schools as professional organizations were embedded in a dense, socially closed network of educators linked together by their commitment to a common set of professional principles.

Networks did little work on their own, however. Principals’ networks offered access to
resources that could be activated to make sense of—and to subsequently manage—the accountability and choice systems. But access alone did not guarantee activation (Lareau 2003; Lin 2001; Smith 2005). To provide benefits, networks had to be activated by principals themselves or by the formal organizations in which they were embedded (i.e., through creating regular opportunities to interact). Principals’ own beliefs about how accountability and choice systems work, the presence of structured opportunities for principals to make use of these networks, and the social closure of their personal (i.e., ego) networks influenced the extent to which they used their networks to make sense of the accountability and the school choice systems, as well as to what ends they used these networks. Social closure refers to networks in which ties are dense and overlapping (Coleman 1990). This structure allows for the emergence of common identities and the maintenance of social norms, although these norms need not be prosocial (Haynie 2001). Networks characterized by social closure also promote trust, which facilitates ongoing exchanges. In this study, principals embedded in networks characterized by social closure were more likely to engage in sustained collective sensemaking, although we cannot ascertain whether social closure was a cause or consequence of this process. Moreover, how principals framed the “problems” of accountability and choice influenced whether they turned to colleagues for guidance and to whom they turned. It was in these social interactions that they further refined their understandings of the accountability and choice systems.

However, once principals’ networks were activated, all networks were not equally able or willing to deliver instrumental and expressive support. Social closure contributed not only to principals’ willingness to draw on their networks but also to their colleagues’ willingness to help. Social closure worked in tandem with the type of resources embedded in these networks to shape the outcomes of principals’ attempts to activate their networks for both instrumental and expressive purposes (Lin 2001). For searching for new information, the most advantageous network was one that provided bridges to parties one did not know, while a dense local network undergirded by shared values was more useful for fortifying existing ideological commitments, facilitating exchanges, and enforcing obligations (Lin 2001). An example is useful in making this point. Suppose that Principal A meets regularly with a group of like-minded principals working in the same geographic area to discuss best practices. Each of these principals provides meaningful support to the others and reinforces their shared values and commitments. Because of their dense, overlapping ties, principals in this network feel comfortable asking peers for assistance, and their colleagues feel obligated to help them. But if a principal wants to hire a new teacher or is searching for information about how things work in other corners of the city, this network will be of limited utility. Conversely, Principal B meets regularly with a group of principals, each of whom is located in a different geographic area of the city, and interacts regularly with principals that she does not know. The density and social closure of this small group, her personal network, provides benefits similar to Principal A’s. Yet unlike the network of Principal A, when Principal B searches for strategies that principals are using to navigate the school choice system, she has a better chance of gaining information to which she otherwise would not have access (Burt 1992). While Principal A receives critical social support and insight into best practices from her peers, Principal B’s relationships with other principals are more useful for navigating district systems and policy. Principals’ social networks, then, should be understood not hierarchically as better or worse but as more or less useful for specific functions.

In the case of the district’s school choice system, the critical resource to which principals’ social networks provided access was information about how to manage the school choice process to achieve the principals’ desired ends, ends that had been established, in part, through the principals’ sensemaking about the local accountability environment. For those principals who sought to select a higher achieving population even though their schools were prohibited from selecting students based on their performance, information about what actions would be sanctioned was particularly valuable. As Weick (1969) has argued, much of what organizations perceive as constraints are actually based on avoidance tests, or assumptions that actions are not allowed by the environment. By virtue of having access to a broader and more diverse pool of information about the bounds of acceptable action, principals who sought to manage their intake constructed
a more accurate portrait of the extent to which they could push the formal rules of the choice process.

The proposed theory brings together sense-making and social network theories to illuminate the role of individual and social cognition in influencing how principals interact with their networks and make sense of the information available to them through these networks. The nexus of these two theories helps to explain how principals’ understandings of accountability and choice are co-constructed through interaction with colleagues, how their framing of accountability and choice influences whether and how they activate these networks for assistance of various kinds, how principals catalog messages gained through their networks, and how principals’ networks are differentially poised to offer instrumental and expressive assistance once they are activated. In what follows, I provide a brief overview of the school choice process in New York City, followed by a description of data and method. I then turn to my findings.

HIGH SCHOOL CHOICE IN NEW YORK CITY

In 1992, there were 99 high schools in New York City; in 2009, only 17 years later, there were almost 400. This growth is due to the founding of new small high schools, which began opening in 1993 with the support of grants from the Diamond and Annenberg foundations. Students have the option to choose these schools and are not zoned into them based on their residential location. In addition, these schools are not free-standing buildings. Rather, the schools are allocated sections of a larger building. Between 1993 and 2000, approximately 75 new high schools opened, with the majority of them located in Manhattan. In 2002, the tempo with which small schools were being brought to scale quickened with the centralization of the school system under Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the infusion of millions of dollars to start small schools from the Carnegie Foundation, the Open Society Institute, and the Gates Foundation. More than 200 new small schools have opened since 2002. Central to this reorganization is the replacement of neighborhood high schools with campuses of autonomous small schools. This plan is far reaching in its scope. For example, in the Bronx, 10 of the 13 neighborhood comprehensive schools have been closed or downsized and converted into campuses of small schools.

New York City is unique in that all students must apply to high school. Students can list up to 12 schools on their applications, and students are no longer allocated to their zoned schools if they do not file a school choice form. The choice process is now modeled after hospital residency admissions procedures. A student’s name appears on the applicant lists of each of the 12 schools that she or he ranks, but the schools do not know whether the student ranked the school 1st or 12th. Students are ultimately offered a seat at one school only.

Currently, five different types of school selection mechanisms exist. Almost all new small schools, including the three schools that are the focus of this study, are unscreened. Admission to these schools is not based on the student’s performance but on the school’s confirmation that the student is making an “informed choice” to attend the school. At the time of the study, schools were told to identify two groups of students: students who made an informed choice, and students who did not make an informed choice but whom the school was willing to accept. Students in the informed choice group were given first preference in the lottery, and if seats remained, students in the second group were then admitted. As I discuss later, what constitutes an informed choice was left to the discretion of individual schools. In an effort to ensure a strong incoming class, some schools used this discretion to raise the bar for admission.

DATA AND METHOD

The data presented in this article were collected as part of an ethnographic study of the founding of new schools in New York City. The larger purpose of the study was to understand how school founders use their social structural position and the network resources associated with this position to garner human, social, and financial resources for their organizations. To sample schools, I operationalized social structural position as different status positions within the school system, which proxy access to different types of resources available through networks. By status, I refer to the Weberian conception of this term, where a status group is defined by social interaction; as Weber
relates, a key measure of entry into a status group may include the attainment of certain levels or types of education.

The three schools that are the focus of this study were sampled from the population of 55 new high schools that opened in the 2004-2005 school year. By compiling and reviewing information available about the founding teams and their principals, I found that the status characteristics of their founders were generally associated with three different founding configurations: mom-and-pop schools (a group of educators currently working together), franchise schools (an organization opening multiple schools), and professional organization schools (a professional development or community organization, or a group of such organizations working together). Mom-and-pop schools were founded by individuals working within the system who lacked elite educational credentials or other forms of political stature within the New York City system. On the other hand, franchise and professional organization schools were generally founded by individuals with elite educational credentials, participants in selective alternative principal preparation programs, or central district administrators. After examining these patterns, I then created a list of three sets of three schools, including a professional organization school, a franchise school, and a mom-and-pop school, and invited nine schools to participate. The preferred set of three schools, which was advantageous because two schools were located in the same comprehensive high school, agreed to participate in the study. In this article, I refer to these schools by the pseudonyms of Excel Academy (the mom-and-pop school), Horizons High School (the professional organization school), and Renaissance High School (the franchise school).

The primary mode of data collection was participant observation, which took place between March 2004 and September 2005. I conducted approximately 1,200 hours of observation at the three schools and at the office and the principals’ meetings of Renaissance Schools, the franchise organization that sponsors Renaissance. At the school sites, the majority of my time was spent observing the activities of the principals and administrative staff; shadowing them through their days; and attending meetings with their supervisors, parents, students, and teachers. At the two schools that incorporated common planning time for teachers, I regularly observed their meetings; at all three schools, I observed professional development activities. When I discovered the importance of the network of schools affiliated with Renaissance for understanding the focal principal’s decision making, I sought permission from the executive director of Renaissance Schools to conduct fieldwork in its office and to attend the monthly principals’ meetings; the insights of these other principals are integrated only as they are relevant to understanding Renaissance’s actions. Finally, at the end of the study period, I conducted semistructured interviews with each of the administrators and teachers; this amounted to 29 interviews that each lasted one to two hours. Interviews were taped and transcribed. This article includes only interviews with administrators, which included a core battery of questions about the central processes of school founding—that is, gathering and managing human, social, and financial resources. These interviews also included questions specific to individual schools that were shaped by my observations over the course of the year and were intended to fill in any gaps in my field observations.

Since a significant fraction of this article focuses on understanding how principals use their social networks, it is worth commenting on how this study approached the collection of qualitative social network data. When principals were first brought into the study, I collected data on their work histories and professional and organizational associations. I also asked for the names of the principals in the city that they knew and would consider contacting if they had a question or problem—what Lin (2001) refers to as “accessed networks”—and asked this question again in September, March, and June. To capture the principals they actually relied on for assistance (principals “activated” contacts), I recorded in my field notes each instance in which a principal contacted another principal for assistance, described a new policy that she or he borrowed from another school, or reported receiving advice from a principal at a meeting. I also asked principals regularly if other principals came to them for help, and I recorded such contacts in my field notes.

A limitation of qualitative and ethnographic studies of individuals’ social networks, in contrast to “name generator” studies that collect network data for all members of an organization, is that the researcher cannot locate principals in the overall social structure of the district or quantify network characteristics such as density in continuous
terms. Thus, the two descriptive network characteristics referenced in this article—density and social closure—are understood in dichotomous terms. In two of the three cases, principals’ primary conversation networks were groups that met regularly and included the same members; I coded these as high density networks in which all members knew each other well and hence were socially closed. While this approach has disadvantages, scholars have questioned the utility of name generators and the network measures derived from them for understanding how actors use their networks for instrumental and expressive purposes (Bearman and Parigi 2004). For understanding how and under what conditions network resources are drawn upon and the processes through which different types of network resources are made available to members, the extended observation afforded by ethnography is critical.

Field notes and interview data were first coded openly using thematic categories generated from the data: Examples of codes used included principals’ social networks, attempts to reach out to fellow principals, attitudes toward accountability, and strategies used to manage the school choice process. Within each of these categories, a series of subcodes was generated inductively. After this phase of inductive coding, I returned to the data and coded using theoretically driven codes developed from the sensemaking and social network theory frameworks; on the suggestion of the reviewers, I later coded principals’ accessed and activated contacts to investigate network activation. Synthesizing the thematically and theoretically coded data, I then developed case summaries for the principals, describing their attitudes about accountability and the choice process and the strategies that they used to manage these processes. These insights were then integrated into my within-case summaries. The creation of these within-case summaries then aided in my subsequent cross-case comparison, the result of which are the findings that follow.

RESULTS

The Three Principals and Their Networks

In this section, I introduce the three schools and their principals, and I describe their professional biographies and the networks in which they are embedded. Mom-and-pop organizations are firmly grounded in a geographic community. Educators in these schools are not newcomers to urban education, and they have lived out their careers in a limited radius. Many of these educators grew up in the local community themselves. Anna, the principal of Excel Academy, is a veteran teacher who graduated from New York City schools. After teaching for many years, Anna worked as an administrator and spearheaded the founding of Excel Academy by bringing together a group of fellow teachers; she assumed the principalship when the school opened. Anna’s network consists of dyadic ties with local educators, growing out of their shared experiences in a small set of schools. Anna’s orientation toward communicating with other principals reflects her lack of trust in the intentions of her colleagues:

I keep in touch with principals that I knew from [the schools I used to work at] because a lot of us are going through the same crap. Other than that, I don’t really reach out to people, because I don’t think everybody has the best intentions. I don’t reach out to [a principal] because I know she has her own issues. I don’t reach out to [another principal] because I think he is very political and has his own agenda that has nothing to do with collegiality.

This lack of trust limits Anna’s willingness to widely activate the relationships in which she is embedded, which makes her sensemaking process about accountability and choice more isolated than those of the other two principals in the study. Here, we see that access—the acquaintance with others who might provide help—is a necessary but not sufficient condition for drawing on network resources. In addition, her orientation toward activating her network limits access to information about how to manage the school choice system. At the same time, her strong dyadic ties to a small number of principals working in her borough allow sensitive information about managing the school choice system to be shared.

Franchises, on the other hand, open multiple schools throughout the city and are conscious of the need to protect their brands. Scrupulously attendant to the bottom line, these schools know that they will be judged both by their cache and their performance statistics. Significant attention is devoted to managing
impressions and standardizing their products. Marlena, the principal of Renaissance High School, is engaged in ongoing conversation about the accountability and school choice systems with the network of principals affiliated with Renaissance Schools. Spanning multiple geographic areas of the city, the Renaissance network has significant instrumental benefits in managing the external environment, providing access to valuable information about district policy and systems. Rather than relying solely on principals to activate the expertise embedded in this network of principals, the franchise has structured information pooling by requiring regular meetings. A senior executive of Renaissance Schools highlighted the benefits of this network’s social closure:

The necessity for a network is much greater than it would be when these educators are veterans and who have figured this out and internalized all of this information. I do think that our networks are different because they are completely honest. There is never going to be an honest network within the Department of Education. It just can’t exist within that context, because these are the people responsible for hiring and firing these principals. . . . I also think that our network works because of the diversity represented. . . . The only reason a network makes sense is because you don’t have things in common.

In this comment, the executive director highlights the primary difference between the formal networks organized by the Department of Education, which were intended to encourage collaboration and information sharing, and the Renaissance network. That the reputation of the Renaissance brand affects every principal means that each principal has an interest in supporting the others, an interest that is bolstered by the affective ties they develop through their frequent interactions and the dense overlapping ties that exist within this group.

The administrators at Renaissance High School also understood the benefits of the Renaissance franchise in terms of the access and information made available through peer principals. As one administrator explained,

It’s the network, it’s the information sharing, it’s the experience. . . . If you do your homework, the people of Renaissance Schools come with a past. With a past, you bring contacts. It’s just the political muscle that Renaissance brings. . . . It’s the ability to shoot an email off when I don’t know what to do . . . and then get 10 responses. So that’s what makes it . . . the experience, the network, and the political muscle.

The Renaissance network exposes Marlena to new contacts in a venue where the ongoing relations facilitated by a common brand engenders trust and thus makes information sharing more likely (Uzzi 1996). From their more experienced peers, new principals share diverse information about running a school, ranging from “best” organizational practices, to when they can safely bend the rules, as well as what actions are ignored by the Department of Education.

Finally, in the view of professional organizations, teaching is not a job or a vocation but a profession much like law or medicine. The hallmark of a profession is an external set of standards against which performance is judged. Strict adherence to bottom-line measures is frowned upon. Public schools have an obligation to serve all students, these educators believe, even if doing so creates monumental challenges for the organization. Rachel, the principal of Horizons High School, founded the school with the assistance of multiple professional development organizations. Her commitment to advancing social justice goals led her to start Horizons, as she reminded her teachers one day before the school first opened:

I want to remind you of why you’re doing this. The kids on your lists, six of 10 of them, statistically speaking, had they gone to a large school, would not have graduated. Six out of 10! It’s criminal. It’s disgusting, and it’s wrong. Part of being a small school is showing that poor kids in tough communities can learn, and that when they do learn, they’ll stay in school. And when they stay in school, they deserve a good school. (Field notes, 9/10/04)

While she has ties to a number of principals in different corners of the city, Rachel’s primary interactions with principals occur in a dense network of educators linked together by their commitment to social justice and progressive education. Like the Renaissance network, this network is socially
closed, but the purposes for which Rachel draws on the network are quite different. She frames the benefits of her network solely in terms of exposing herself to others’ best practices:

I basically said to the [other progressive principals in my borough] I need someone to talk to about my job and you do too...I can’t do this if I don’t have somebody to talk to. How to delegate and share my work is my largest issue that I talk to people about. How to lead teachers. What works, specifically what works for instruction.

In contrast to the networks of the other two principals in the study, which they used primarily to manage the external environment of the schools, Rachel drew on her network to provide critical support in her efforts to manage the internal operations of her school. Her network, as I discuss in the next section, also supported her commitment to improving outcomes for the most disadvantaged students, even if serving these students ultimately depressed her school’s accountability indicators.

**Constructing the Demands of the Accountability Environment**

Despite operating within the same local, state, and federal frameworks, each of the three principals made sense of the accountability environment differently. These principals faced uncertain accountability pressures and consequences from the district and relied on their past experiences and their social networks for guidance. Unlike the No Child Left Behind Act, which clearly outlines the sanctions applied to schools failing to make adequate yearly progress, the carrots and sticks attached to local accountability targets for attendance rates, course passage rates, and promotion rates remained open to interpretation during the study period. Principals had a loose understanding that the district’s goals for new schools were an attendance rate of 90 percent and course passage and promotion rates of 80 percent. However, their own worldviews, professional biographies, and the colleagues with whom they discussed this issue influenced their social construction of these targets’ significance, the consequences for failing to meet them, and the appropriate stances toward these targets. Principals’ diagnoses of the demands of the accountability environment involved three processes: gathering information about the targets’ importance through networks, interpreting signals through the filter of principals’ past experiences and professional biographies, and framing accountability demands with a logic of agency or a logic of constraint (Lareau 2003).

Principals in the Renaissance network used large portions of their regular meetings to discuss the importance of meeting local accountability targets. In this socially closed context where all principals knew each other well, principals voiced their fears openly about how these data, which did not take into account the initial performance levels of students, would be used to evaluate their schools. As one Renaissance principal gravely advised his colleagues,

You need to hit numbers and that is a reality. If you lose sight of that, you are going to be lost. If I go into my superintendent and say to him, “I didn’t get my numbers in math, but let me tell you something, I moved these kids [up],” he’ll tell me to move my stuff, and somebody else will move in [to my job] the next day. That’s the reality. (Field notes, 5/4/05)

Marlena interpreted her fellow principals’ advice as indications that she needed to adapt her management to ensure that she produced good numbers, although the numbers themselves were decoupled in her mind from the educational reality they were intended to represent. As she often explained, her first priority was “protecting her stats.” Marlena constructed her school as facing additional pressure from Renaissance Schools, which is extremely vigilant about monitoring student outcome data. Marlena explained her understanding of Renaissance Schools’ demands in the following way:

Renaissance Schools is run by philanthropists and...they need our schools to be, and I don’t want this to sound negative at all, but a sound bite. They need...me to be able to showcase in laymen terms, in a way that a CEO guy who has never been around teenagers, is able to look at a school in a way that really entices this man who has been meaning to help urban youth for 20 years to say, “What do you
Marlena felt that she had significant agency in handling performance indicators. Performance statistics could be “managed” and subsequently repackaged as sound bites, and she saw the production of good performance data as necessary to receive the political benefits associated with Renaissance Schools. As she related, “Renaissance Schools has that political clout. . . . They are a force to reckon with. With that comes a lot of responsibility.” In sum, Marlena filtered signals from the Department of Education, her partner organization, and her fellow principals and interpreted these signals to mean that her energy should be directed at producing favorable accountability statistics. Marlena believed that the attendance rate was taken most seriously by the district and thus focused much of her time and attention on monitoring these statistics.

In contrast to Marlena, Anna, the principal of Excel Academy, made sense of the district’s accountability environment in isolation. Although she believed that the Department of Education would hold new schools accountable for their results, she did not view these numbers as something that she should fixate on daily, largely because they were out of her control. As she related,

It’s very important. That’s what drives everything. All reports that are generated are significant for you personally as a principal and for the Region. . . . So I think that in this time and age, bottom line, that’s what drives everything. On a day-to-day basis, though, you go in to do your job. You can’t have that on your mind. . . . But when it all goes on paper, they are going to look at their numbers and they don’t care what I spent the last five months doing. . . . They just go, “How many passed? How many were still in school?”

An experienced educator in the New York City system, Anna appreciated the importance of these targets but felt that excessive attention to them would impede her ability to do her job as an instructional leader well on a day-to-day basis. Nonetheless, she accepted that her job evaluation would depend on these numbers. While Marlena expressed a sense of agency in reacting to the importance of these demands, Anna’s discourse was marked by a sense of constraint. She would do what she could to meet these targets but did not believe that these numbers were manipulable to the degree that Marlena did. Like Marlena, Anna believed attendance was the most important metric on which the school would be evaluated.

Rachel, the principal of Horizons High School, recognized the importance of achieving outcome targets but also maintained a parallel set of professional standards against which she evaluated her school’s work. Although grounded in her own professional biography and worldview, these standards were buttressed by the like-minded principals in her network. Rachel and these principals saw themselves as part of the “small schools movement,” a movement they believed was committed to educational equity and progressive education. Rachel thus viewed the accountability environment only through the broader lens of what she was trying to accomplish, which involved multiple educational ends:

These stats are the only thing that’s important. . . . I don’t have any issue with the Regents pass rate being at a certain level, or the attendance rate, and I don’t feel like I have much room to argue with the measures. . . . Now we have to find ways to get kids ready for it. But I don’t think it increases kids’ love of learning or gets them to think about things holistically or prepares them well for college.

Rachel’s guiding logic was grounded in educator professionalism. According to Rachel, educators had a responsibility to act within the confines of what she called “professional standards.” Thus, achieving the targets was important not because of the threat of sanctions but because of what the targets actually measured in terms of the education of Horizons students. Rachel philosophically agreed with being held to a set of targets and believed that it was reasonable for all schools to meet these targets, regardless of matriculating students’ prior achievements. The imperative to achieve accountability targets was always framed in terms of the school’s moral and professional obligation to serve all kids well.

In sum, even though these principals operated in the same regulatory context, their own
professional biographies and worldviews and, for Marlena and Rachel, the relationships in which they were embedded, interacted to shape their orientation toward the accountability system. As I discuss in the next section, principals’ sensemaking about the accountability system influenced whether and how they used their networks, and the information available through these networks, to actively manage the types of students attending their schools.

Reacting to Perceived Opportunities in the Environment

In addition to making sense of the district’s accountability targets, principals in the study had to navigate a complex school choice system. Through their relationships with other principals, Marlena and Anna recognized the lack of real oversight by the Department of Education, determined the range of safe behavior, and adopted multiple strategies to acquire a higher achieving ninth-grade class. Yet the principals’ social networks provided them with access to different information about strategically managing the school choice system, and the principals varied in the extent to which they activated these networks. While Marlena used the Renaissance Schools network to learn of manifold tactics to game the system and the social closure of this group aided in the sharing of information, Anna’s repertoire was more limited. Rachel, who was opposed to selecting higher performing students, did not turn to her network to glean strategies for managing the choice system and acted in accordance with the official rules for unscreened schools.

The term network activation overstates the intentionality involved in some of the information transfers between principals about the school choice system. Certainly, many of these transfers occurred through principals’ purposive actions to gather information. But networks could also be activated on behalf of principals by formal organizations like the Renaissance franchise. In some cases, principals learned of strategies passively, simply by inhabiting spaces in which other principals’ use of these strategies were visible.

This section details four strategies that Marlena and Anna learned of through their networks and subsequently used. Both of their networks alerted them to the potential to signal their expectations to applicants during recruitment and to use data from the Department of Education’s application system to manage their intake. However, Marlena’s network made her aware of two additional strategies unknown to Anna: forming alliances with junior high schools and discovering the ranking structure of applicants.

Signaling. Marlena and Anna attempted to control their schools’ populations by sending signals to parents and students about what kinds of students were a “good fit” for the schools. In transmitting these messages, the principals sought to weed out less-desirable students. Following the example of other schools in her network, Marlena accomplished this feat by presenting a polished, expectation-oriented organizational identity to potential students. Renaissance Schools hired professional graphic designers to create a logo for each Renaissance school. At each of the recruitment fairs, the Renaissance table was furnished with logo T-shirts, posters, and water bottles. Renaissance also used its connections to well-known organizational partners to draw students, displaying the logos of its partners on the posters behind its table. Renaissance’s pitches to students focused on its high expectations for students and its internship opportunities. Students were told that they had to accept the expectations of Renaissance; parents and students who questioned Renaissance’s policies were told to look elsewhere.

Although she rejected the marketing in which Renaissance engaged, Anna saw enrolling the “right” students as the most important input to Excel Academy and used strategies shared by her colleagues to do so. Anna perceived that how schools presented themselves during these fairs influenced the population they attracted. For example, Anna was warned against creating a brochure in Spanish; a fellow principal told her that doing so would attract the “wrong” population, and she followed this advice. Anna also stressed the uniform policy during her discussions with students and parents, suggesting that if the student did not want to wear one her school might not be “a good fit.” Anna emphasized to parents that the school would not have the resources to serve special education students and encouraged them to apply to other schools. At these fairs, Anna would place a star next to the names of the parents and students with whom she had particularly positive conversations as a reminder to choose these students.
But Marlena and Anna did not adopt many of the strategies they observed other schools using at these school information fairs. In fact, in the distribution of signaling strategies that I observed, both Marlena and Anna were significantly less involved in signaling to deflect students than their peers were. My observations revealed that many schools used applications, mandatory information sessions, and much stronger language to deter unwanted applicants. For example, 12 unscreened schools shared a similar application requiring that students provide the most recent report card and two letters of recommendation, one from an eighth-grade teacher and one from a guidance counselor, assistant principal, or principal. The application also asked for the student’s test scores, retention history, and involvement in advanced courses during the eighth grade. Finally, the application included additional questions requiring a narrative response:

1. What are three things your current teachers would say about you?
2. What makes you want to attend a school that will demand your very best academically and will expect you to work harder than you probably ever have before?
3. What are five future goals you have for yourself?
4. What are some activities to which you belong either in school or outside of school?
5. What is the last book you read outside of school? Would you recommend that book to a friend? Why or why not?

Schools often asked parents and students to engage in additional activities, such as requiring attendance at an information session with a parent or guardian, before they would consider the student.

During the fairs, many principals emphasized to potential applicants that they “could afford to be picky.” As one principal that I observed said to a student and her mother,

“I need to know, right here and now, if you have commitment. So the person who does this,” and then he sucks his teeth, scowls, and cocks his head, “when I tell them that we have a uniform. I need to know that if I call you and tell you that you need to come in on Saturday because we have to get you ready for the SAT that’s happening in a month, that you aren’t going to have that problem coming in. I need to hear that we have commitment from the parent too.” (Field notes, 2/6/05)

In short, other schools used much stronger signaling tactics than did Marlena and Anna, and neither Marlena nor Anna chose to adopt many of the strategies they witnessed. The link between exposure and adoption, then, is mediated by professional biographies, worldviews, and the sensemaking process itself. For Anna, excessive marketing represented an unfortunate trend in which she did not want to take part, irrespective of its effects on her student population. For Marlena, simply knowing that other schools were using applications was not enough; exposure was a necessary but not sufficient condition for adopting new strategies that she perceived as risky.

Unlike the other two principals, Rachel did not attempt to deflect applicants. At recruitment fairs, Rachel explained the idea behind the school and talked to students about what kind of school they were looking for. She told students that they should consider whether they wanted to learn in a large or small environment and asked them questions about their interests. If a student was interested in a theme not offered at Horizons, she would go through the catalog of school options and provide the student with potential options. Rachel was equally welcoming to parents who asked if there were special education or bilingual services and parents who did not, explaining that the school would have a separate special education class if it had enough students and otherwise would have additional teachers as support within regular classrooms.

**Using data from the Department of Education’s application system.** The district’s application system provided opportunities for unscreened schools to choose higher achieving students. Through this computer system, each school received a list of students applying to the school, although the school did not know whether the student ranked it, for example, 1st or 12th. This data file included
each student’s English-language-learner and special education classification, reading and math test scores, absences, grades, address, and junior high school. Schools were told to identify students who made an “informed choice” by assigning them a 1, while students who did not make an informed choice but the school was willing to accept were assigned a 2. If the school did not fill all of its seats with students making an informed choice, additional seats would be filled by students in the second category.

The Department of Education prohibits unscreened schools from using student performance data to select students. Nonetheless, both Marlena and Anna learned through their relationships with other principals that such regulations were loosely enforced. Indeed, these rules were difficult to enforce since the provision that students must make an informed choice to attend these schools devolved significant decision-making authority to the schools about the meaning of informed choice. Here we see principals’ sense-making about the accountability environment in action, as each principal made somewhat different decisions about what kinds of students would create problems for the school’s accountability statistics. These decisions were informed both by their own prior experiences and by the input of the principals in their networks. In addition to the English language learners and full-time special education students whom new schools had a waiver to eliminate, Renaissance eliminated part-time special education students and chose only those with 90 percent or higher attendance. Excel eliminated full- and part-time special education students and chose students with attendance rates of 93 percent or higher. As Anna explained, attendance was the key outcome monitored for new schools, and “it’s putting us behind the eight-ball already to start out with kids with truant problems” (Field notes, 5/15/04). However, Excel did not use the waiver to screen for English proficiency status so long as students had greater than 93 percent attendance; her staff included multiple native Spanish speakers, and she believed they could effectively educate these students. In choosing students for the second year, the school also did not rank the student unless she or he had an 80 grade point average or above. Inviting me to sit with her as she ranked the students, the guidance counselor walked me through her thinking on identifying students making an “informed choice.” For students with missing data, she related, “No information. Sorry! Why would I take a kid that I know nothing about? I feel bad for those kids because no one is going to take them” (Field notes, 1/19/05). From her perspective, the goal of this screening process was to reduce uncertainty for the organization.

While Marlena and Anna saw getting the right students as the most important input for the school, Rachel felt that it was important to be open to all students. As she explained,

> These are the kids and the kids need a school. So, I mean, yeah, there are kids who are coming in who had 80 absences the year before, so we know they are going to continue to have attendance problems. But they do deserve a high school to go to.

The Department of Education’s criterion was that students made an informed choice, which was loosely defined as attending a recruitment fair or information session or contacting the school in some way. Thus, she identified all students that she met at recruitment events as making an informed choice.

When I asked Rachel whether other schools were screening, she related, in a matter-of-fact manner, that schools were not allowed to use this information and that schools that did so would be punished. But Rachel also noted that if her peers were selecting students, they would not tell her because they know doing so conflicts with her educational philosophy. Nonetheless, she understood their actions as a byproduct of an accountability system focused on a small number of quantitative indicators. As she explained,

> The problem with using only quantitative indicators is that it forces people to do unethical things. They feel like they don’t have any choice but to do that. It’s not that they’re bad people—they’re put in this position. There’s tons of evidence from the business world that this is what happens when you use only one indicator.

(Field notes, 1/28/05)

**Forming alliances with junior high schools.** Through the Renaissance network, Marlena learned of two additional strategies: forming alliances with junior high schools and discovering the ranking structure of applicants. To recruit students for its first ninth-grade class, Renaissance
forged a relationship with a selective junior high school that channeled applicants to the school. This alliance allowed the school to reduce the contingency associated with the application process. The junior high school guidance counselor provided the names of those students ranking the school first, provided that the school would choose these students.

In choosing students for the school’s second ninth-grade class, Marlena decided that she did not want to rely on student fairs to recruit students. Instead, she wanted to go to “feeder schools”—the schools from which Renaissance High School received good students in its first year—and recruit students from there. Marlena identified 10 schools from which Renaissance should recruit, the majority of which selected students based on their test scores. Renaissance then contacted the feeder schools with a letter stating how well their former students were doing at Renaissance and thanking them for their contribution to the students’ growth. The balance of the letter encouraged the school to send other students to Renaissance. Renaissance also arranged appointments at these schools to plug its school to the students.

Marlena and the administrative assistants that helped her with the choice process were candid about the rationale behind controlling the student population. Ultimately, these choices were framed by how they made sense of the accountability environment. As Joanne, an assistant to Marlena, explained upon my asking how they would select their students,

You know, I’m torn about it. We want to be open to everyone, but we have to meet these targets. And all of the kids that they’ve just given us have been total disasters. . . . We could probably get them there in a few years, but not in one. (Field notes, 11/8/04)

Marlena’s strategy of focusing on strong feeder schools was not one she developed alone; rather, through the network of Renaissance principals of which she was a part, she learned that one of the franchise’s most successful schools used this technique.

**Discovering the ranking structure of applicants.** Marlena borrowed another technique from one of her fellow principals whose staff called potential students to determine which students ranked the school first. This way, the school would not waste spots on those students who were unlikely to be placed at the school anyway and gave the school more control over the admissions process. This fellow principal, whose behavior Marlena wished to emulate, shared at a principals’ meeting that because there was a lag period between the school learning the names of the candidates that ranked it and having to choose the students, the following strategy could be used:

Theoretically we could talk to some kids that ranked us second or third and tell [them], “Hey, you really want us, you need to put us first.” Which means you can utilize the month of February to have information sessions at your school, and invite certain kids to come in to get more info. If you can sell them on your school, you can’t ask them what they ranked you. You can get into trouble for that. But the reality is you can say, “Do you want to come here? Because if you don’t rank this [school] as 1 and you rank us as 2 through 12, you are playing Russian roulette. All bets are off.” (Field notes, 1/16/05)

In response to this advice, Marlena asked the guidance counselor to call the 25 parents who visited the school during open houses or on individual tours to find out which families ranked her school first.

In summary, principals talked about the selection of their students as a matter of organizational survival and turned to their peers for assistance in managing this process. As one of the Renaissance Schools principals aptly summed up,

[The admissions process] is your lifeline, and if you don’t deal with it, you’re dead. I put six people on that. You’d be a fool not to put all of your resources into that because it will make or break your school. (Field notes, 3/9/05)

In this discourse, selecting the school’s population is understood not as a choice but as necessary for survival. In the next section, I demonstrate that, for some schools, the formal admissions process was only the first step in managing the school’s population.
Managing Organizational Uncertainty

To develop a comprehensive understanding of whether and how schools shape their populations, we must also examine how schools managed their populations during the school year and how principals’ relationships with other principals influenced this process. “Over-the-counter” students, or OTCs as New York City educators call them, are those students who arrive in the fall and either are new to the country or the school district or were not placed in any high school. Principals believed these students were problematic both in terms of their behavior and their academic performance. If schools’ registers fell below their capacity, the central placement office could send them OTCs. Schools that were not selective at the front end of the process, like Horizons, were particularly vulnerable. As a result, while Renaissance High School and Excel Academy confronted a small number of OTC placements, Horizons filled almost half of its class with OTCs. Schools’ management of OTCs, as I will demonstrate, can be understood as an effort to reduce organizational uncertainty in an environment where performance statistics were of the utmost importance. Yet as with their management of the admissions process, their networks provided different access to information about how to do so successfully.

Marlena proactively fended off OTC students. To keep the school from receiving OTCs, she kept students already transferred to other schools on her register throughout the fall. This way, the placement office would not “push in” with students that she did not want. Marlena became aware of this tactic through the Renaissance Schools network, through which principals would share strategies for deflecting these students. Again, in this instance Marlena benefited from a network that had been activated by the Renaissance organization. As this exchange from a principals meeting revealed, strategies for avoiding OTCs proliferated:

Principal 1: I’ve been thinking a lot about the numbers game, and I was worried about having classes of 30, but it’s so much better to be overenrolled than underenrolled [so you don’t get OTCs].

Principal 2: We can review eighth-grade report cards coming in. I had a student that failed every subject and was absent 97 days. It did bounce back and forth for a really long time, but that student was eventually returned to his middle school. Next year, take a look at the eighth-grade report cards.

Principal 3: I did two kids like that. I went to the middle school and met with the principal. One hundred thirteen days absent, 122 days absent, these guys are just tornados. They [the middle schools] get rid of their headaches, and they become your headaches. Call them on the carpet on that. (Field notes, 9/28/05)

Renaissance’s relationships with local politicians proved helpful in the realm of placement. As I explain from my field notes below, Marlena cut a deal with a city councilwoman that she would take a student that the councilwoman wanted to place at the school if the councilwoman would help Marlena remove two students that she did not want:

Marlena says to her secretary, “Joan, we need to focus on getting Maritza and Alissia in the door. Get the councilwoman on the phone and tell her that if she doesn’t move soon, we won’t get Maritza in. And we need to get those two on roll before we do anything else, and get those other two off.” Later, someone from the high school placement office calls Marlena to discuss Maritza’s mother, “a parent who has a team of council people and lawyers behind her. She has an army. She would be great for the school, but this woman is going to get what she wants. It may be at my school, or at another school, but she’s going to get it. I don’t have room in my school. I’m packed. But I don’t mind—it’s just one kid. I have other kids that I don’t want.” (Field notes, 11/15/04)

Marlena did receive a call from the director of the student placement office advising her not to admit students in this way again, but she was not sanctioned. In short, although there are official rules specifying appropriate procedures, they are loosely enforced. Savvy principals who are willing to test the environment are able to easily circumvent them.
At Excel Academy, the school did fall below register and thus enrolled a handful of OTCs, but the volume was not substantial enough to significantly affect the school. At Horizons High School, many admitted students did not materialize at the beginning of the school year, leaving the school with a large number of open seats. While at the beginning of the year Rachel did not manage her school’s population because of her own professional standards, by the middle of the year she expressed a desire to limit the OTCs who continued to trickle in throughout the school year, as she felt they destabilized the school. That these new students had not been socialized in the school’s norms since the beginning of the year, she explained, made it difficult to maintain a common culture. Note that Rachel’s rationale for wanting to exclude these students differs from that of Marlena, who also considered the contribution of these students to the school’s performance statistics. Although the network of professional educators in which Rachel was embedded provided many benefits, these educators could not tell her how to deflect these students. Moreover, because of the social justice norms of the network, the few principals who had developed strategies to successfully deflect OTCs did not share this information.

According to Rachel and Horizons teachers, these OTC students were poorer, were lower scoring, and had a disproportionate number of serious problems at home. Day-to-day life at Horizons verified their hypothesis, as Horizons teachers and administrators spent large amounts of time attempting to identify and meet these students’ social, emotional, and academic needs. The magnitude of the problems faced by Horizons students had very real consequences for the school on a day-to-day basis, and the district and Horizons’ partner organization became concerned with the school’s performance statistics. Nonetheless, absent knowledge of how to limit her OTC population, Rachel was not successful in doing so.

**Counseling Out “Problem Students”**

Principals’ understandings about accountability also influenced how they framed and managed “problem students.” Renaissance exercised control over its population by counseling out these students. Students were understood as problematic either in terms of their behaviors or in terms of their poor attendance, which affected the organization’s statistics. At Renaissance, in meetings with parents of problematic students, Marlena would indicate that if another incident occurred, they would have to discuss whether the student could remain at the school. Marlena technically lacked the authority to peremptorily dismiss students. Because parents were unschooled in the rules of the system, they often acceded to her requests.

At Renaissance, students were often identified as potential transfers because of their contribution to the statistical indicators crucial to the school. Marlena saw attendance as the primary indicator on which the Department of Education was holding schools accountable. As Marlena said about a student with many absences whom she wanted to counsel out, “He’s ruining our stats. At this point, he’s becoming a statistical problem” (Field notes, 11/8/04). Because behavior and attendance were often related, Marlena would then use a behavioral justification for having the student transferred out of the school, although she exaggerated the extent of the problem in her communications with department officials. For example, she labeled a student who asked a friend to back him up in a fight as “inciting gang violence” under the city’s discipline code.

Students with bad behavior were not the only students whose statistical contribution was considered. At Renaissance, performance statistics also played a role in whether the school encouraged certain students not to transfer. For example, two girls with strong attendance and grades both wanted to reapply to a selective school from which they were rejected the previous year. They needed the guidance counselor’s assistance to complete the application process, but Marlena instead requested a meeting with the two girls, the guidance counselor, and herself. The purpose of the meeting was to convince both of these girls to remain in the school. During this hour-long meeting, Marlena told the students that they would fall through the cracks at the new school and might not even make it to college, and she stressed that they were in better hands at Renaissance. Both girls still wanted to move forward with their applications, but Marlena requested that she meet with both of their parents before she would allow their applications to move forward. Only one of the two girls ultimately filed an application.

Although Excel Academy responded at the front end of the admissions process in a manner similar to Renaissance, the school was less successful in transferring students once the school year began. Instead, Excel relied on chance
opportunities to remove students from the school. Administrators viewed students with low attendance to be problematic, as they damaged the school’s statistics, but the school’s efforts to remove students arose from behavioral issues, which were highly correlated with poor performance statistics. Teachers at Excel understood that attending the school was a privilege, not a right. Accordingly, they often spoke with students about transferring if they did not want to be part of the school culture. Jonathan, a teacher at Excel, related his approach to this issue:

Jonathan explains that kids often threaten to transfer when they’re faced with a rule that they don’t like. Earlier today, Vanessa was rowdy in class and started saying to Jonathan, “I hate this school. I want to transfer.” He replied to her, “Great. If you don’t want to be here, I’ll help you fill out your transfer application.” He tells me that this school is for kids who want to make their dreams come true and to prepare to go to college. “If you don’t want to be here,” he says, “there are plenty of other average schools in the city where you can just go and act like you want to, and I tell them that they can spend the rest of their lives asking people if they want fries with that.” (Field notes, 3/14/05)

In other cases, having confrontational conversations with parents led them to transfer their own students. Excel used this strategy with a small number of students, asking parents to come in to school each time there was an infraction. Parents often tired of returning to the school for conferences and decided to pull their students out of the school.

Anna, however, understood that some schools were more able to select and discharge their students than other schools were, relating,

Everything with this is political. People are using their political capital to do everything—to get the right location, to get the students that they want, to get more space. We could have tried to play politics, but we don’t even know the rules of the game. (Field notes, 11/23/04)

Lacking relationships with those who could teach her “the rules of the game” and only willing to trust the intentions of those principals with whom she had strong ties, Anna recognized that some schools were better positioned than others to manage their student populations.

Because Rachel’s philosophy precluded her from pushing difficult students out of her school, the manner in which problems were dealt with was quite different. One such example emerged in her reaction to one of the most troubled, low-performing, and oppositional ninth-grade students. For the first five months of school, Nikki had a conflict with a teacher or with a student almost every day. In February, she stopped coming to school. The principal continued to call her house and her emergency contacts but could not get in touch with her or any member of her family. In theory, Rachel could have petitioned to have Nikki taken off of their roster at this point, as Marlena often did. Certainly, her persistent absence was damaging the school’s statistics. Nonetheless, Rachel continued to contact her family. A month and a half after she disappeared, Nikki called Rachel’s cell phone, saying that she had not been able to come to school because she did not have a Metrocard and thus had no transportation to school. Rachel said that she would bring a Metrocard to her apartment and brought the card to her a few hours later. Nikki was in school the next day.

Rachel demonstrates that information garnered through networks is a necessary but not sufficient condition for gaming the system. For the most part, Rachel would refuse to use this information if it were available. Yet in the domain in which Rachel was willing to manage her intake, such as limiting OTCs who arrived late in the school year, Rachel did not have the necessary information to accomplish this feat. Other like-minded principals dominated her network, and these principals all shared her orientation; the few principals who did strategically manage their intake concealed their gaming activities.

DISCUSSION

This study asked whether schools actively managed the school choice process and sought to identify social processes that were associated with principals’ disparate approaches. In this section, I summarize this study’s substantive findings, discuss its theoretical contributions to sensemaking and social network theories, and close by
considering the implications of these findings for education policy.

I found that the family should not be understood as the sole actor influencing the outcomes of school choice policies. Two of the three schools in this study did not sit idly and wait for their students to be allocated to them. Rather, they actively attempted to influence their student intakes. Schools used multiple methods to enroll a higher achieving student population, including signaling to families during the recruitment process, using the city’s data management system to their advantage, creating alliances with junior high schools, and learning the ranking preferences of the students. Once the school year began, one school in the study counseled out students and attempted to deflect OTC students. These strategies are strikingly similar to those used by headmasters in the United Kingdom, as were the justifications used for these actions. In both contexts, principals felt that in the current accountability environment, leaving their student intakes to chance meant jeopardizing the survival of their schools.

But the three principals in the study varied significantly in how they managed the choice process, despite the fact that they had similar incentives to respond strategically. A number of factors interacted to influence principals’ approaches. First, the principals’ own biographies and worldviews influenced how they made sense of the accountability environment and also affected how they engaged with principals in their social networks on issues of choice and accountability. After all, access to social networks means little unless the networks are activated, and understanding how principals made sense of the environment provided insight into why they used these networks in different ways. While a network structure characterized by social closure seemed to aid principals’ activation by promoting trust, activation should not be understood solely as an individual phenomenon. Instead, formal organizations played an important role in creating and structuring opportunities for regular interaction. Network activation, then, is a joint accomplishment, one to which both individuals and organizations contribute.

Principals’ networks provided access to two major kinds of support. First, they provided instrumental benefits, which amounted to access to information about how to approach the choice and accountability systems for Marlena and Anna. In contrast, Rachel used her network to derive a different kind of instrumental benefit—access to other principals’ best practices—while also reinforcing her commitment to educational equity and the goals of the small-schools movement. For all three principals, networks served to reinforce their educational views and beliefs. Because principals’ networks varied in the types of resources embedded in them, however, these networks were differentially poised to provide instrumental and expressive support. Marlena’s network, which included principals with access to vast stores of information she did not already have, helped her understand how to strategically manage the system. Critically, these principals informed her of what actions would be overlooked by the district. Anna’s strong ties with a small number of principals also provided guidance on how to strategically manage the system, although she had access to a less comprehensive set of strategies.

It is important to emphasize that information garnered through networks was a necessary but not sufficient condition for gaming the system. If Rachel had access to the information available through Marlena’s network, it is unlikely that she would have used this information in the same way. Although she might have chosen to deflect OTCs who arrived late in the year if she knew how to navigate the system, she otherwise would not have used this information. But for principals like Marlena and Anna who are risk averse and wary of getting caught, networks provided critical information about safe methods for strategically managing their intake. This study demonstrates that embeddedness in ongoing social relations potentially has both a bright and a dark side (Granovetter 1985). The same conditions that produced the sharing of best practices to increase equity in Rachel’s network also enabled the sharing of strategies of how to game the choice system in Marlena’s network (Vaughan 1999).

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to both sensemaking and social network theories. Too often in sociology, social networks are invoked as a full explanation for social phenomena. But the existence of networks tells us little about the functioning of networks and the mechanisms through which networks shape social action. Bringing together sensemaking theory with social network theory demonstrates that how people perceive and define the problems they face influences whether and how they use their networks for assistance. By the same token, sensemaking theory has always recognized that sensemaking...
is a social process but has not documented how
the nature and structure of the relationships in
which sensemakers are embedded affect this pro-
cess (however, see Coburn 2001). A network per-
spective highlights that sensemakers have access
to different information and support through their
networks and that the structural features of these
networks (such as social closure) may affect the
assistance that sensemakers are willing to request,
as well as their peers’ willingness to contribute.
By drawing attention to the role of networks and
their structural features in the sensemaking pro-
cess, sensemaking theorists can bring structure
back into their theory and, in doing so, address
the frequent critique that sensemaking gives actors
too much agency. In sum, to understand how net-
works contribute to individual and organizational
behavior and opportunities, we must examine
how individual and social cognition shape actors’
use of their networks as well as the benefits that
they derive from them, and the synthesis of these
two theories helps to advance that goal.

Beyond these theoretical contributions, this
study has two key implications for education pol-
icy. First, my findings suggest that when schools
simultaneously face strong accountability pres-
sures, schools may respond strategically to weakly
regulated choice systems. Increasing the oversight
and auditing of the choice process—in this case,
by eliminating the informed choice criterion
that effectively allowed unscreened schools to
select students or by closely monitoring student
retention—would go a long way toward eliminat-
ing some of these problems. The findings of this
article indicate that the microstructures of school
choice systems influence their implementation
and thus should be closely scrutinized. Most nota-
bly, providing unscreened schools access to stu-
dents’ performance data unwittingly assisted
principals in screening students. However, schools’ less visible attempts to select students
will be more challenging to regulate, as these pro-
cesses unfolded in small, subtle ways—for example,
by stressing the school uniform rule or marketing
the school to particular middle schools—but these
actions aggregated to produce very different stu-
dent populations in these schools. Ultimately,
policy makers face difficult trade-offs between
the movement toward school autonomy that gen-
erally accompanies market-based choice systems
and the transparency and uniformity in the stu-
dent allocation system.

Finally, if policy makers wish to minimize or
eliminate the selection processes documented in
this study, they must restructure principals’ incen-
tives by designing accountability systems that do
not penalize schools serving low-performing stu-
dents. Because the No Child Left Behind Act
does not take into account students’ starting
points, schools of choice are rewarded for educat-
ing students who are higher performing to begin
with. Until these systems are fundamentally rede-
signed, the outcomes of school choice policies are
likely to reflect not only students’ choices but
schools’ choices as well.

NOTE

1. I thank an anonymous reviewer for making this
point.

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BIO

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