

**Factors Influencing Parents' Selection of Schools for Children with  
Disabilities:  
A Systematic Review of the Literature**

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**Abstract**

*School choice has become one of the most controversial issues in education. However, little is known about how parents of children with disabilities chose schools. The present article includes an international systematic literature review of research on the factors influencing the decisions of parents of children with disabilities when selecting schools or special education programs. The literature review showed that parents of children with disabilities consider a large variety of factors when choosing schools, including the availability of special education programs, distance of the school, social continuities, class size, teachers' characteristics, parent-teacher communication, beliefs about disability, and the children's well-being. Socioeconomic status and parents' areas of residence had a mixed influence on the decision-making process. The studies found a dire need for research on how parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds choose education programs for their children.*

**Keywords:** *school choice, parents, children with disabilities*

**Introduction**

On September 16, 2014, *Education Week* published an article documenting the experience of Diana Diaz-Harrison, a mother who established a charter school for kids with autism, one of a hundred nationwide charter schools focusing on special education (Prothero, 2014). While the school was founded in response to the specific needs of her son with autism,

her act ran counter to the ideal of inclusive education. Nevertheless, this special charter school was positively accepted by other parents who shared a similar situation, some of whom moved from other states to have their children enroll there (Prothero, 2014). These were the parents who could afford to change their place of residence in order to be near a better school. This is an example of one important determinant of choice in selecting schools, that is parents' ability to navigate resources, access, and educational opportunities for their children.

Parents traditionally enroll their children into schools assigned by the local school district (Altrichter, Bacher, Beham, Nagy, & Wetzelhütter, 2011; Jacobs, 2011). However, school choice policy offers parents a degree of autonomy: they may select a school or an education program for their children beyond the boundaries of neighborhoods and districts (Center for Education Reform, 1993; Jacobs, 2011; Shumow, Vandell, & Kang, 1996; Pyryt & Bosetti, 2007; Ysseldyke, Lange, Delaney, & Lau, 1993). Parents also have the option to select charter schools, magnet schools, or private schools. Their choices have considerable impact on the social and academic outcomes of students with disabilities. This being the case, it is important to examine the factors that impact parents' choice of schools.

Research studies have examined the school selection process and have determined that parental choice of school is strongly influenced by socioeconomic factors such as race and income (Ball, Rollock, Vincent, & Gillborn, 2013; Deluca & Rosenblatt, 2010; Ellen & Kristie, 2008; Goyette, 2008; Joshi, 2014; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015) and by the areas in which parents reside (Danielsen, Fairbanks, & Zhao, 2015; Denton, 2001; Goyette, 2008). However, little is known about how parents of children with disabilities chose schools. There is a paucity of research available on the factors influencing the school selection of parents of children with disabilities (Glenn-Applegate, Pentimonti, & Justice, 2011; Ysseldyke et al., 1993).

This systematic literature review is timely. First, there has been increasing interests among parents of children with disabilities in exercising their right to choose a school. Considering only the case of charter schools, between 2003 and 2013, the number of public school students enrolled in charter schools increased from 1.6% to 5.1% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). In 2012, as many as 13.6 % of charter school students were students with disabilities compared to 12.9 % in assigned public schools (Rebarber & Zgainer, 2014).

Second, there are concerns regarding the accuracy of information available for parents' school choice and the consequences of the choice. The lack of accurate information may negatively affect both parents and students with disabilities. Research shows that low-income and immigrant families often make choices based on the publicly promoted assumption that private or charter schools are naturally better than public schools (Beabout & Cambre, 2013; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015). Insufficient knowledge and the desire to provide what they believe to be a better education may lead parents to make decisions with severe consequences. For instance, parents who transfer their children with disabilities from public to private schools must pay extra costs that the state voucher they receive does not cover, and they lose partial or full civil rights protection under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA; 2004; Almazan & Marshall, 2016; Samuels, 2016; Shah, 2012).

Finally, parents of children with and without disabilities have different considerations when selecting schools, yet research on school choice often overgeneralizes parental decision making, conflating the two groups (Glenn-Applegate et al., 2011; Ysseldyke et al., 1993). Parents of children without disabilities often choose a school that is academically superior and matches their philosophy, one that is safe and close to home (Bell, 2009; Betts, 2009). However, other factors may come under consideration when parents must choose schools for children with

disabilities, most importantly, the availability of services needed for their children (Byrne, 2013; Glenn-Applegate, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2016; Villavicencio, 2013).

The dynamic process of selecting education programs, which is reinforced by school choice policies, provides ample room for the perpetuation of inequality of educational opportunity based on the variables outlined above. The present review takes into account parents' socioeconomic backgrounds (race/ethnicity, income, education, immigration status, and residential areas). In addition, it includes early childhood (Pre-K) up to secondary education. More specifically, this review addresses the following questions:

- What are the factors influencing the decisions of parents of children with disabilities when selecting schools or special education programs?
- Do those factors vary by parents' race or ethnicity, immigration status, income level, educational attainment, and residential area?

## Method

To answer the research questions, we conducted a systematic literature search and identified studies published between January 1988 and July 2016, when the literature search was conducted. In what follows, we present the search terms, inclusion criteria, and methods used to identify the relevant studies.

## Search Terms

The first step of the search process was to set terms that were the most likely to yield relevant articles. Five levels of search terms were used. Level one search terms were *parent\* or family or caregiver*. Level two search terms were *race or ethnicity or Caucasian or White or African American or Black or Hispanic or Latin\* or Asian or Indian or Native American or third world or low income or low SES or poor or middle class or upper class or wealthy or rural or urban or immigrant or English learner or non-English speaking or non-English-speaking or minority or underserved*. Level three search terms were *decide or decision making or select\* or prefer\* or choose\**. Level four search terms were *school or education or education program or Open Enrollment or voucher program or charter school or magnet school or private school or special school or alternative school or integrated school or mainstream school or inclusive school or school choice*. Level five search terms were *child\* with special needs or special needs child\* or disability or child\* with disability\* or disorders or learning disability\* or learning difficulties or learning problem or autism or autism spectrum disorder or Asperger's or deaf-blindness or hard of hearing or hearing impairment or emotional disturbance or behavioral disorder or emotional disorder or behavioral disorder or psychiatric disorders or intellectual disability or mental retardation or mental illness or cognitive impairment or multiple disabilities or orthopedic impairment or physical disabilities or other health impairment or speech disorder or language impairment or traumatic brain injury or visual impairment or blindness or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or at risk*. After consultation with expert librarians, we utilized five electronic databases in education: ERIC, Education Research Complete, PsychINFO, Web of Science, and Family and Society Studies Worldwide.

## Inclusion Criteria

We then established the inclusion criteria. Articles were selected if they: a) aimed to describe or answer questions about the factors parents consider when choosing a school; b)

included parents of children with disabilities; c) were published in English in peer-reviewed journals d) were published between January 1, 1988 and July 31, 2016; e) used qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method, or single-case subject design. The review focused on empirical studies published since 1988, which marked the start of the open enrollment plan through which students were allowed to enroll in any public school regardless of their residential location (Hill & Jochim, 2009). Initial screening from the database search showed that among studies meeting these criteria, only a few were published in the United States. Therefore, we extended the inclusion criteria to cover global research. We excluded studies that focused on parents' satisfaction with their children's schools or education programs and studies that does not include the decision making of parents of children with disabilities.

### **Search Strategies**

We used three search strategies. First, we applied the search terms to the five electronic databases and identified 2,662 studies. Then, we screened the initial 2,662 studies using the selection criteria. The screening filtered the studies to 20. Of those studies, we read the full texts closely to make final decisions about their eligibility. Four studies remained. The second strategy was to conduct a backward search from the previously published literature review, which was Byrne (2013) and to select the studies that match the inclusion criteria. By applying this strategy, we identified three additional studies. Finally, we conducted a hand search that added eight more empirical studies corresponding to our inclusion criteria. As a result of the application of these three strategies, 15 empirical studies were included in this review.

### **Results**

The results are organized in two parts. We first report the descriptive information about the selected studies. Then, we present the findings of the selected studies addressing the research questions.

### **Descriptive Information**

From the studies included in this review, parental decision making about school for their child with disabilities has received scholarly attention only since 1993. This is in keeping with the fact that education research often overlooks the issue of disability (Artiles, Dorn, & Bal, 2016). Since then, there has been a consistent research effort internationally to capture the dynamics of school selection from the perspectives of parents of students with disabilities. Eight of the 15 studies (53%) discussed here were conducted in the United States, six (40%) in England, and one in Australia. However, many aspects of factors related to school choice by parents of children with disabilities have still been insufficiently addressed in these 15 studies, such as race/ethnicity, immigration status, income level, and parents' educational attainment. The studies fall short in addressing the decision making of non-White parents of children with disabilities. Participants for the two major studies of Glenn-Applegate et al. (2011; 2016) included only 20 and 7.21 percent respectively of African American parents. Four studies included small number of parents from other ethnicities, such as Chicano, Puerto Rican, Latino, Turkish, and mixed-race (Flewitt and Nind, 2007; Glenn-Applegate et al., 2011; Glenn-Applegate et al., 2016; Ysseldyke et al., 1994). Only Ysseldyke et al. (1994) provided rationales for the lack of participation of African American parents in their study. Not one of the studies provided sufficient information about family's immigration status or made an in-depth connection between the school selection factors and the immigration status. Jessen (2013)

highlighted a case study of an immigrant father from Jamaica who moved to the United States in 2004, and Freeman et al. (1999) mentioned having English- and Spanish-speaking parents in their studies, yet neither study connected these characteristics in their discussions.

Ten of the 15 studies (67%) did not specify the income level of the parents. Two studies (13%) mentioned having participants from a middle-class background (Flewitt & Nind, 2007; Glenn-Applegate et al., 2011), while three other studies (20%) mentioned having participants from middle- and working-class parents (Bagley & Woods, 1998; Bagley et al., 2001; Glenn-Applegate et al., 2016). The studies also lacked information about educational background: ten of the studies (67%) failed to provide information on parents' educational attainment.

Studies included parents from various educational backgrounds. Educational levels ranged from eighth grade to completion of doctoral degrees (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014; Freeman et al., 1999; Glenn-Applegate et al., 2011, 2016; Ysseldyke et al., 1994). Of those, three studies (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014; Glenn-Applegate et al., 2016; Ysseldyke et al., 1994) mentioned having more than 70% of participants with college degrees. Nevertheless, none of the studies focused on how parents with lower education attainment and low-income select schools which suggests an urgent area of investigation for future research on parents' choice.

Residential location has been a relatively common focus of researchers' attention, but comparative analysis has been rare. Two studies (13%) focused on parents living in rural areas (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014; Finn et al., 2006), while only one study (7%) focused specifically on the decision-making of parents living in urban areas (Jessen, 2013). Jessen (2013) conducted his study on parents in New York City. Two studies (13%) focused on parents living both in urban and suburban areas (Flewitt & Nind, 2007; Glenn-Applegate et al., 2011). On the other hand, four studies (27%) had a combination of parents from urban, suburban, and rural or semi-rural areas (Bagley et al., 2001; Bagley & Woods, 1998; Ysseldyke et al., 1993, 1994). No study focused solely on parents living in suburban areas.

Based on the types of disability, there has been a minimal focus on a single disability. Eight of the 15 studies (53%) included more than one type of disability simultaneously in their research, among them specific learning disabilities, developmental delays, speech disorders, emotional/behavioral disorders, Asperger's syndrome, hearing impairment, cerebral palsy, and other physical disabilities. Twenty-seven percent of the studies focused specifically on parents of children in secondary education, 20% on pre-school, 20% on primary school, six percent on both primary and secondary school, and seven percent from Pre-K until secondary school. Again, the comparative analysis has been limited. The types of the educational program selected ranged from none, through choosing a school within the assigned school district, choosing one outside it, choosing a charter school, or choosing an inclusive or alternative school.

In terms of the type of research methodologies used to investigate school choice, qualitative methodologies were dominant (n=10; 67%). Four studies (27%) employed quantitative methodologies, and only one study (6%) employed mixed methodology. In what follows, we provide an overall picture of the findings. Table 1 provides detailed information about the characteristics of the selected studies and Table 2 provides their findings regarding the factors influencing parents' selection of schools for students with disabilities.

**Table 1. Summary of the Reviewed Studies**

Study (Author/year)	Purpose	Method	Grade and disability	Type of education programs	Parents demography	Country
Bagley and Woods (1998)	To discuss parents' experiences selecting a secondary school.	Qualitative	Secondary school; disability was not specified	Type of program not specified	No demographic information mentioned	England
Bagley, Woods, and Woods (2001)	To explore the experiences and reasons selecting secondary school.	Qualitative	Secondary school; disability was not specified	Type of program not specified	Middle class in a town, working class in a high unemployment urban area, and a semi-rural area	England
Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi (2014)	To study the dynamics of school placement and how the choice schools addressed the needs of children with disabilities.	Qualitative	Grade 7; had communication disorder, cognition or learning difficulties, and sensory or physical disability	Open enrollment	About 70% mother; age 41-50. Majority has higher education degree	England
Finn, Caldwell, and Raub (2006)	To learn about why parents choose charter school for their children with disability.	Qualitative	Age 7-14; EBD, speech, Asperger syndrome, LD.	Charter school	No demographic information mentioned	The United States
Flewitt and Nind (2007)	To learn about how parents decide to combine inclusive and special education	Qualitative	Preschool /early childhood education; Speech and language, Learning disability, autism, physical disability due to CP	Inclusive and special education	Sixteen White UK, three Turkish, middle class	England
Freeman, Alkin, and Kasari (1999)	To examine parents' satisfaction and reasons to change educational program for children with Down Syndrome	Quantitative	0-21 years old; Down syndrome	Special to inclusive school	Two hundred and ten English and 81 Spanish speaking; English speaking parents had higher education than then Spanish ones	The United States
Glenn-Applegate, Justice, and Kaderavek (2016)	To explore what factors parents of children with and without disability value when selecting pre-school	Quantitative	Pre-school; 12 children with autism, 6 cerebral palsy, 6 Developmental delay	Early childhood special education program	Twenty five percent were middle to high class, 22.5% in poverty, 24% mothers went to college but no degree, 3.1% finished eighth grade, 23.6% had doctoral degree. Poor mothers had lower income	The United States
Glenn-Applegate, Pentimont ,and Justice (2011)	To examine what parents value when selecting a preschool for their children with disabilities	Qualitative	Pre-school; All types of disabilities; majority were developmental delay and Speech disorder	Not specified	41 White, 11 black, 1 Puerto Rican, 1 other ethnicity. Average annual income \$60.000; English was the main home language	The United States
Jenkinson (1998)	To investigate how parents of children with disabilities in Victoria decided whether to enroll their children in inclusive or special school.	Quantitative	58% were in primary level, 26% in secondary level, 2 students in special program. Majority of students with physical disability in inclusive school, students with	Integrated, partial integration or special school	No demographic information mentioned	Australia

			intellectual disability were in special school			
Jessen (2013)	To examine the impact of the programmatic resources available for students with special needs.	Mixed method	Not specifically mentioned the types of disability yet one of the child in the case study had speech disorder	District high school	No demographic information mentioned	The United States
Lange and Lehr (2000)	To discuss why parents transfer their children to charter schools.	Quantitative	Grade was not specified; all types of disabilities	Charter school	No demographic information mentioned	The United States
McNerney, Hill, and Pericano (2015)	To study the factors influencing parents' secondary school selection for their children with autism	Qualitative	Secondary school; Autism	Local district school	No demographic information mentioned	England
Runswick-Cole (2008)	To explore parental attitude toward inclusion of their children in mainstream school	Qualitative	Grade was not specified; all types of disabilities	Special residential school, and inclusive school	No demographic information mentioned	England
Ysseldyke, Lange, and Delaney (1993)	To examine the reason parents enroll their children through open enrollment program	Qualitative	Not specified	Other school districts through open enrolment	No demographic information mentioned	The United States
Ysseldyke, Lange, and Gorney (1994)	To examine the characteristics of students with disabilities and the reason to participate in the open enrolment program in Minnesota	Qualitative	Grade varied-majority were 7 <sup>th</sup> grade; Majority LD, other disabilities mentioned but not autism;	Other school districts through open enrolment	Various income and education level. Majority were white. None were African-American	The United States

**Table 2. Factors Influencing Parents' Selection of Schools**

Study (Author/Year)	Factors influencing school selection	Demographic indicators						
		Education	Ethnicity	Language/Immigration status	Economic status	Rural	Urban	Suburban
Bagley and Woods (1998)	Students' special education needs, provisions and facilities, students' happiness	Not available	Not available	Not available	Middle class parents were more aware of market choice, visited schools, and attended meetings before making choice.	Not available	Not available	Not available
Bagley, Woods, and Woods (2001)	Child's special education	Not available	Not available	Not available	Middle and working class	Order of concerns: proximity	Order of concerns: special education needs, children	Order of concerns: special

	needs; child's preference, convenience to commute				parents prioritized special education needs, middle class parents concerned about social continuity.	and convenience, special education needs, and children happiness	choice, children happiness	education needs, proximity and convenience to travel, and social continuity
Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi (2014)	Specialists, facilities and programs suiting students' needs, and class size	The author neither described the demographic information of the parents, nor structured the findings based on race or ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, and residential locations.						
Finn, Caldwell, and Raub (2006)	Charter schools addressed students' special needs; had better communication, and smaller class size	The authors did not specifically mention the demographic information of the participating parents. Although the articles mentioned that all the charter schools were in rural areas, there was little evidence to generalize the findings.						
Flewitt and Nind (2007)	Location, programs addressing children's disability, integration	Not available	Not available	Not available	Not available	No adequate facilities and transportation	Adequate choices of facilities/programs and availability of transportation	
Freeman, Alkin, and Kasari (1999)	Transition to new school level, integration, additional service and support from school, financial capability	The authors discussed parental satisfaction based on level of education, yet did not include education, income level, ethnicity and residential areas in the reasons for school change.						
Glenn-Applegate, Justice, and Kaderavek (2016)	Teacher characteristics, safety, facilities, staffs and programs	No association between maternal education and school selection	Not available	No association between SES and school selection	Not available	Not available	Not available	Not available
Glenn-Applegate, Pentimonti, and Justice (2011)	Facilities, programs, and location	Discussion of the findings did not take into considerations parents' demographic information. Although, 75% (41 parents) were white and 20% (11) parents were African American						
Jenkinson (1998)	Integration, academic benefits, children happiness and self-esteem, focus on one life skill, class size, funding, and	The author neither described the demographic information of the parents, nor structured the findings based on race or ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, and residential locations.						

	teachers' attention.							
Jessen (2013)	Distance and facilities	Not available	Not available	Not available	Location	Not available	Not available	Not available
Lange and Lehr (2000)	Services provided, dissatisfaction with the old school	The author neither described the demographic information of the parents, nor structured the findings based on race or ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, and residential location.						
McNerney, Hill, and Pericano (2015)	Location, optimization of student' potential, and enhance academic and social skills	The author neither described the demographic information of the parents, nor structured the findings based on race or ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, and residential location.						
Runswick-Cole (2008)	Beliefs about disability	The author neither described the demographic information of the parents, nor structured the findings based on race or ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, and residential location.						
Ysseldyke, Lange, and Delaney (1993)	Teachers' effectiveness, special education program, proximity, social continuity, and class size	Not available	Not available	Not available	Not available	Teacher's effectiveness	Social continuity, school environment, and class size	Social continuity, school environment, and class size
Ysseldyke, Lange, and Gorney (1994)	Suits children's special education needs, teachers' attention, communication, and social continuity	College educated concerned about familial issues, high school educated valued teachers' attention.	No sufficient evidence	Not available	No effect of parents' income across categories	Concerned about special education program and dropout rate	Concerned about environment	Care about special education program and dropout rate

### Factors Influencing School Selection

In presenting the findings of the selected studies, we adopt the three categories of factors related to school choice, following the framework that Glenn-Applegate et al. (2011) established: *structural*, *process-related* and *familial*. Although this framework was developed to examine the concept of quality parents consider when choosing a preschool for their children with disabilities, it has robust explanation of each factor that can be universally applied to parental decision making in any stage of their children education. Structural category includes factors such as school programs, class size, teacher-student ratio, and safety of the physical environment. The process-related factors include interactions between teachers and students, teachers' response to students' needs, the quality of instructional content, and parent-teacher communication. The familial category covers factors such as proximity to home or parents' workplace and the cost and schedule of the programs. We also added a fourth category: *child-related factors*, that is, those that take into account the children's wellbeing. In what follows, we discuss the findings of the selected studies as they relate to those four categories.

**Structural factors.** Our review shows that when examining potential schools, parents scrutinized the following characteristics: the availability of special education programs that are suitable to the needs of children, and the size of the school or class.

**Availability of special education programs.** This factor was identified in 14 of the 15 studies (93%), which suggests that the primary factor parents consider is whether special education programs, facilities, and specialist staffs are available in the schools. Ysseldyke et al. (1994) found the majority of the 141 parents in a statewide survey in Minnesota transferred their children with disabilities to other public school districts because the new schools had specific special education programs and/or specialists. In addition, some parents did not hesitate to travel significant distances outside the local school district on a daily basis to reach schools that had experts and facilities suiting their children's needs (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014; Lange & Lehr, 2000). This finding is consistent with the previous reviews that parents were most satisfied with secondary schools that had expert teachers, well-funded and suitable programs, appropriate school provisions and facilities, and a safe school environment (Byrne, 2013).

**Class size.** Parents of children with disabilities preferred schools that had a lower teacher-student ratio. Because new schools had a smaller class size, parents opted to leave local district schools for charter schools (Finn et al., 2006; Lange & Lehr, 2000), to leave inclusive schools for segregated ones, (Jenkinson, 1998), and to leave local schools for other school districts (Ysseldyke et al., 1993, 1994). These parents perceived smaller class size maximized individual teacher-student interaction, a benefit to children in the learning process (Lange & Lehr, 2000).

**Process-related factors.** This category includes the teachers' interpersonal characteristics and personal attention, and parent-teacher communications.

**Teachers' interpersonal characteristics.** Parents were more satisfied with the school staff who showed a positive attitude during the teaching-learning process. In a survey about factors parents valued when selecting a pre-school for children, completed by 321 preschool caregivers, Glenn-Applegate et al. (2016) found that parents rated as highly important whether "teachers were caring, stable, and responded to children's individual needs" (p. 136). This factor was rated higher (mean = 3.85 out of 4) than school safety (mean = 3.75) and parent-school communication (mean = 3.61). Likewise, Lange and Lehr (2000) found more than 90% of parents reported feeling certain about the good quality of the teachers at charter schools.

**Parent-teacher communications.** Effective communication with teachers and opportunities for parents to engage in school activities are also important parental concerns. Lange and Lehr (2000) found that a number of parents moved their children from the assigned public schools to charter schools in order to sustain effective communication and positive relationships with teachers. Similarly, Finn and colleagues (2006) found that parents were most satisfied with a two-way communication process in which both parents and teachers listened to and respected each other's perspectives. In another study comparing the assigned and chosen schools, parents noted that they were more frequently involved in school events and more frequently contacted their children's teachers in chosen schools than in assigned schools (Ysseldyke et al., 1994).

**Personal attention.** Our review showed that parents valued highly the individual attention that teachers provided to their children. This factor is closely linked to class size (structural category) and communication (process-related category). Forty-two percent of caregivers in a statewide survey valued the opportunity for their children with disabilities to engage in more personalized learning with school staff (Ysseldyke et al., 1994). Additionally,

parents had positive comments about school staff and teachers who not only taught but also built a connection with the student and family. One parent positively reflected on the experience of her son in the chosen school as follows: “My son works with a speech teacher and I really like that she [the speech teacher] not only works with him on his speech, but she has built a relationship with him” (Finn et al., 2006, p. 99). In short, parents changed schools to seek an education system that provided close attention to their children with disabilities.

**Familial factors.** The studies showed that in making decisions about schools, parents considered factors related to practical issues such as proximity or commuting distance, and also factors related to social continuity and beliefs about disabilities.

**Proximity.** Commuting distance played a range of roles in the school selection process from nonexistent to significant. Some parents wanted their children to attend a school closer to home so that they could respond quickly in case of emergency (Jessen, 2013). Proximity in this context provided emotional reassurance to parents. Parents also preferred a school close to home because it made the daily commute easier (Bagley et al., 2001; Ysseldyke et al., 1993). Some parents were eager to send their children to a chosen school they believed had better special education programs, but long distance and the unavailability of a school bus kept the children from attending those schools (Flewitt & Nind, 2007). In contrast, for other parents, distance was not a major factor. Convenience in commuting and proximity to home were not important enough factors to keep them from seeking schools outside their neighborhoods (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014; Jenkinson, 1998; Lange & Lehr, 2000).

**Social continuity.** In this context, social continuity means a desire to maintain the children’s existing supporting system such as peers, siblings, or care providers. Parents in the studies of Ysseldyke et al. (1993, 1994) selected schools in other districts because they wanted their children to continue attending a day care center closer to the chosen school than to the assigned school. Sibling bonds were also important: parents wanted their children to attend the same school because the siblings could support each other (Jessen, 2013; Ysseldyke et al., 1993). This is specifically salient in Jessen’s study (2013) reporting the case of a mother who was struggling to find a school for both daughters with special education needs, as follow: “Part of their special needs, it seemed, was social and emotional, and Candace [the parent] wanted them [the two daughters] to feel support by each other and the closeness of the family” (p. 446). Social continuity plays so significant a role that parents seemed hesitant to change the children’s existing support system.

**Beliefs about disability.** Parents’ worldview about disabilities affects their choice of whether to attend an inclusive or a segregated school. A majority of parents who preferred inclusive schools valued social model of disability, which believes that disability does not locate within the impairment of an individual (Flewitt & Nind, 2007; Freeman et al., 1999; Jenkinson, 1998; McNerney et al., 2015; Runswick-Cole, 2008). Those parents assumed that inclusive schools provided greater social integration, for the child with a disability, specifically with other children from the same neighborhood (Flewitt & Nind, 2007; Jenkinson, 1998; McNerney et al., 2015), and provide better quality programs to enhance their children’s academic competency (Jenkinson, 1998) and social skills (McNerney et al., 2015). In contrast, parents who believed in the medical model of disability- a system of belief that places disability within the impairment of an individual and is subjected to special treatment-enrolled their children in special schools to encourage the children to focus on one life skill (Jenkinson, 1998) and because the special schools had experts that might provide better interventions or possibly even cure the disability in

question (Runswick-Cole, 2008). Parents' view of the nature of disability led to their perception of different educational needs, which in turn affected their school selection processes.

**Children-related factors.** In regard to school choice, some parents reported their children's needs, happiness, and self-esteem were more important than the academic outcomes. They believed that their children could only reach their full potential if they were in a happy and caring environment, which did not highly emphasize academic grades (Bagley & Woods, 1998; Jenkinson, 1998; Mc Nerney et al., 2015). Parents were also afraid that by moving to inclusive schools their children might lose confidence, having to compete with their peers without disabilities (Jenkinson, 1998). For those reasons, parents might choose to have their children attend a segregated school or to continue attending a similar inclusive school. Most important to them was that their children be happy.

In summary, the studies showed that when selecting schools, parents of students with disabilities sought an education system that addressed children's special education needs, where the teacher-student ratio was low, where there were frequent parent-teacher communications and many opportunities for parents to be involved, where staff and teachers had positive attitudes, where children could keep their existing support system, and where the school's values matched those of the parents.

### **Demographic Differences and School Choice**

The second research question addressed the issue of whether factors related to school choice differ according to parents' socioeconomic background. The selected studies indicate a concerning but not surprising pattern. Not one of them discusses findings based on parents' race/ethnicity or language.

**Income level.** Studies suggested that income has a mixed impact on parents' school selection. Bagley and Woods (1998) found that middle-class parents were more informed about the school choice options, in part because they often visited and attended school meetings before selecting a school for their children with disabilities. Further, Bagley et al. (2001) found that working-class parents prefer a school closer to home due to convenience in travel and the availability of transportation, compared to middle-class parents. In contrast, Glenn-Applegate et al. (2016) and Ysseldyke, et al. (1994) found no difference across socioeconomic status. By means of multiple regression, Glenn-Applegate et al.'s study (2016) showed that a child's disability status, parents' educational attainment, and poverty status were not significant among preschool selection factors as predictors of parents' preference. Similarly, Ysseldyke et al. (1994) found there were little differences in decision-making across parents' income and education levels. However, the authors noted that highly educated parents were concerned about familial issues such as proximity and social continuity, whereas parents with high school or lower educational attainment were more concerned about process such as the personality of the teachers and the amount of personal attention provided to their children.

**Area of residence.** Among the studies discussing school selection in relation to where parents reside, no clear patterns emerged to explain the ways in which parents from rural, urban, or suburban areas select schools. Several studies found that parents living in rural areas were more concerned about a specific structural issue such as the availability of special education programs or teacher quality (Ysseldyke et al., 1993) than were parents who resided in urban and or suburban areas (Flewitt & Nind, 2007; Ysseldyke et al., 1993, 1994). However, Bagley et al. (2001), in a longitudinal study, found a contrasting result: parents living in rural areas prioritized

proximity and convenience of travel over the availability of special education programs for their children. In contrast, parents from urban and suburban areas prioritized special education programs more than proximity. Parents residing in urban and suburban areas were also concerned about structural issues, yet their specific concerns were the safety of the school environment (Ysseldyke et al., 1993, 1994) and class size (Ysseldyke et al., 1993). Studies also indicated a gap in the availability of special education programs and transportation between rural and urban areas. Urban areas had more options of schools, special education programs and transportation compared to rural areas (Flewitt & Nind, 2007).

**Immigration status.** One study reported on the school selection process for an immigrant parent (Jessen, 2013). Jessen found just like other parents of children with disabilities, the immigrant father selected schools with specific special education programs and experts, in this case basing their choice on the availability of a speech therapist. Concerned about finding the best program, he sought advice from a counselor to decide which school to enroll his child in. Below we discuss the findings from the international research literature that we reviewed.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this present review has been twofold: first, to identify the factors that parents consider when selecting schools for their children with disabilities, and second, to examine whether parents' demographic characteristics influence the selection process. Discussion of the findings has been organized by research questions, limitations and recommendation for research and practice.

## **Factors that Influence the School Selection Process**

In selecting schools for their children with disabilities, parents consider multiple factors that require careful examination. These factors have been categorized into four groups: structural, process-related, familial, and children-related factors. The most commonly cited factor was the availability of a special education program that best meet the needs of their children. Other influential factors cited were: (a) class size, (b) school-parent communication and engagement, (c) teachers' attitudes, (d) children's well-being, (e) distance between school and home, and (f) parents' beliefs about disability. These overarching factors suggest that while it is clear there may often be a conflict between options and needs, to many parents, the need to meet the special education requirement of their children has become a non-negotiable factor. The need to find the most suitable special education program seems to outweigh the desire to enroll into a school focusing on academic achievement. This clearly shows a distinct difference in decision-making between parents of children with and without disabilities.

While parents of children with disabilities prefer a school that has a specific and appropriate facility and expertise, in the selection process parents are limited by their boundary of rationality (Jessen, 2013; Villavicencio, 2013). That is despite the facts that parents have their ideal criteria of schools, the choice parents make is not based on their hope for an ideal school, but on the most reasonable option that suits the needs and resources of the family. The obstacles to choic may be technical factors such as the availability of transportation or they may be related to parents' commitment to provide social and emotional supports to their children.

## **The School Selection Process and Socioeconomic Status**

Research on parents' selection of schools in general has claimed the importance of parents' education, family income, and race or ethnicity (e.g., Ellen & Kristie, 2008, Joshi, 2014; Sattin-

Bajaj, 2015). However, the majority of the empirical studies have not yet considered the importance of race or ethnicity.

The majority of the studies involved White parents. This results in an underrepresentation of racial minority parents having children with disabilities in the practice of and research about school choice. This underrepresentation might partially be due to a lack of timely information disseminated to minority parents (Gastic & Coronado, 2011; Ysseldyke et al., 1994). Having timely and accurate information with feasible access to options that are culturally responsive to the diverse needs, interests, and strengths of students and parents are basic factors that are pivotal to exercising school options.

Parents' income and education, according to the selected studies, have a minimal impact on the school selection process for children with disabilities. This means that parents from low income backgrounds might have a similar rationale to parents from more affluent backgrounds. A possible explanation could be that the process of choice among parents of children with disabilities is more nuanced, and the limited data available have been insufficient to explain the pattern. Although race/ethnicity and other socioeconomic factors do not play a clear role in factors affecting parents' choices, they potentially play a role in creating and expanding available options, as in the case of Ms. Diaz-Harrison described at the beginning of this review, who herself established the kind of school her son needed.

### **Limitations**

This literature review has been limited, in its description of the apparent factors that influence parents' school choice, to those factors which can be categorized based on school and family characteristics. Specific attention has not been given to the characteristics of children themselves, such as their ages and their own choice of schools they want to attend. Second, the criteria for selection of research studies did not include those that focus on parents' satisfaction with the current school placement or provision. The exclusion of those studies may have led to discarding some research that does in fact more fully cover the perspectives of parents from diverse cultures, educational and income level, and residential locations. Including those studies could potentially also expand this review to not only examine factors affecting parents' decisions, but also factors contributing to parents' satisfaction with the choices they have made. Finally, this review could not fully answer the second research question, concerning whether or how demographic backgrounds influence the ways in which parents select schools.

### **Conclusion**

School choice policy reinforces and validates parents' decisions not only to exercise the school options, but also to have more control of their children's education (Hill & Jochim, 2009). The policy, however, comes with serious challenges regarding equity. Unlike Ms. Diaz-Harrison, who was able to build a charter school for her son, not all parents have the capacity (i.e., knowledge, time, network, and financial support) even to explore and choose among the many options of available schools, much less to create their own. On a smaller scale, it is difficult even to obtain correct, useful, and timely information about those schools and programs and the advantages and disadvantages of attending those educational systems. Parents from nondominant racial, linguistic, and economic backgrounds, possibly also recent immigrants, are more prone to be vulnerable to these issues.

Further research can delve into which parents are capable of creating options for themselves, and which parents have the capacity to "vote with their feet" (Danielsen et al., 2015;

Henig, 2009; Tiebout, 1956) in order to be able to enroll their children in the schools they desire. Moreover, critical scholars in the field of education have warned us against the detrimental impact of school choice (e.g., voucher programs) in public education, specifically for students from non-dominant groups and students with disabilities (Apple, 2006).

Research should also expand its focus to involve parents of students with disabilities from various socioeconomic backgrounds, especially parents from minoritized groups such as African American, Latino, Native American, and non-English speaking parents. Our review also showed that research on parents' choice has overgeneralized about types of disability, mostly combining parents of children from a wide range of disabilities, rarely focusing on one single type of disability (e.g., autism). McNerney et al. (2015) acknowledged the urgency of research on a single type of disability. Focusing on a single type of disability might provide different perspectives on how school choice decision-making regarding select schools varies by type and severity of disabilities and what support school professionals can provide to children with disabilities and their families.

Lastly, research with a sharper focus on geography, such as differences between parents in rural and urban areas, can expand on the extent to which geography matters to these parents. According to Bell (2009, 2007), geography in parental choice appears in two concrete forms: *space*, meaning distance, commute time, and availability of transportation; and *place*, meaning the neighborhood and the community including its history, political leanings, race, and class, and social interactions attached to it. The selected studies in this review discussed geography only in the context of distance; but it is also important to research the second aspect of geography, that is, whether and to what extent the context of place matters to parents of children with disabilities.

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