Mothering in a Era of Choice: Race and Gender in Schooling Decisions of Homeschool and Public School Families

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MOTHERING IN AN ERA OF CHOICE: RACE AND GENDER IN SCHOOLING DECISIONS OF HOMESCHOOL AND PUBLIC SCHOOL FAMILIES

A Dissertation Presented

by

MAHALA DYER STEWART

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment Of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2018

Sociology
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Last, but certainly not least, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the women who volunteered to participate in this study, and without whom this dissertation would not have been possible. To them, I am eternally grateful.
ABSTRACT

MOTHERING IN AN ERA OF CHOICE: RACE AND GENDER IN SCHOOLING DECISIONS OF HOMESCHOOL AND PUBLIC SCHOOL FAMILIES

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My dissertation draws from in-depth interview data to compare the schooling choices of 95 mothers living in United States. The sample is split between white and black mothers. Within each racial group, one set teaches their children at home and a second set sends them to public schools. School choice, which places the responsibility of selection on individual families, is central to current U.S. education debates. Yet homeschooling, an option that transfers labor from schools to home, is often overlooked in these debates. To date no research has compared homeschoolers to other schooling families in the same region, or examined the impact of the local education context across these two groups. Prior studies, even those interested in inequality, focus on families who send their children to traditional public schools, charter schools, and private schools, while mostly leaving out those families choosing to homeschool. Yet, U.S. survey data show much growth over the past two decades in the number of white and black homeschooling families. Studies with homeschoolers tend to focus exclusively on them, without comparisons
to other schoolers in the region. Thus, my study offers a rich comparative analysis for how school choice initiatives are understood by families who are confronted with the same range of choices, yet are enrolling their children in different sorts of schools.

This dissertation expands gender, race, family, and education scholarship on two fronts. First, I find that schooling decisions—both homeschool and public school—draw on the intensive work of mothers. Within the family, mothers are disproportionately burdened with this responsibility of choice. Women’s narratives reflect the intensive work they do to navigate schooling options, while the meaning and experience of this work varies by race. Second, I find that decisions around schooling are shaped by resources and racialized experiences of family (i.e. importance of nuclear and extended family) and schools (i.e. bullying and discrimination). When schooling situations arise in which families are unsatisfied, those with more resources often choose to transfer schools or homeschool. This presumably leaves those with fewer resources behind, and appears to maintain, as opposed to reducing, gender, race, and class inequalities across families. These findings support policy initiatives that invest in creating equity across schools so that no family is “left behind” in under-resourced schools.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgments</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER

1. MOTHERING IN AN ERA OF CHOICE
   - Why Homeschool?                         | 1
   - Theoretical Frames                     | 4
   - Research Methods                       | 6
   - Dissertation Overview: Towards an Intersectional Framework | 19

2. “EVERYBODY JUST WANTS WHAT'S BEST FOR THEIR KID”: WHITE MOTHERS’ SCHOOLING LOGICS
   - Racial Logics and Schooling            | 23
   - Methods                                | 26
   - Findings                               | 29
   - Discussion                             | 32

3. “SCHOOL IS SUPPOSE TO BE A PLACE OF LEARNING, NOT WHERE YOU FEEL UNSAFE”: BLACK MOTHERS’ SCHOOLING LOGICS
   - Literature Review                      | 48
   - School Choice                          | 49
   - Methods                                | 54
   - Findings: School Choice Paths          | 59
   - Discussion and Conclusion              | 74

4. “I DON’T TALK TO ANYONE”: HOMESCHOOL MOTHERS’ FAMILIAL SUPPORTS
   - Methods                                | 77
   - Findings                               | 83
   - Discussion and Analysis                | 88

5. CONCLUSION
   - Theoretical Contributions              | 107
   - Broader Implications                   | 109

BIBLIOGRAPHY                                  | 123
**LIST OF TABLES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1.1 Sampling Strategy</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 1.2 All Respondent Demographics</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.1 White Respondent Demographics</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.1 Black Respondent Demographics</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.2 School Paths</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.1 Homeschool Demographics</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.2 Homeschool Support</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.1 All Respondent Demographics</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
MOTHERING IN AN ERA OF CHOICE

Maureen

“Traditional education doesn't work for my kid. I’m always trying to reconcile what does she need to know? Just because I learned it doesn't mean that she necessarily has to but it's hard to reconcile. That’s probably my biggest stressor, because I feel responsible. I would hate for her to [think] ‘Gee, I wish my mom had made me [learn] this so that I could take this college class.’ As a mother that’s going to happen anyways. It's always all our fault (laughs).”

Maureen, a middle-class white woman in her mid-fifties met me at the new artisan coffee shop in the downtown of Lincoln, the suburban and predominately white middle-class neighborhood where she, her husband, and their daughter have lived for several years. Maureen's daily schedule revolves around providing care and education to her thirteen-year-old daughter, Emily, who has been homeschooled since she was ten. Maureen explains how she came to the decision to homeschool, despite her satisfaction with the academic rigor of the charter school her daughter had attended prior to coming home; it was the academic pressure her daughter experienced and the negative social pressures that finally led Maureen to decide to start educating her daughter at home, taking her out halfway through her fifth-grade year.

While Maureen describes being certain about her decision because her daughter is “a lot more happy” and “a lot less stressed” than she was when attending the conventional school, the choice is laden with responsibility; she is now the one primarily responsible for her daughter's education. Because of this, she explains:
“I’m always trying to reconcile what does she need to know.” She fears that her daughter will develop remorse towards her mother later in life, realizing that there may be areas of her home education that fell short, and blame Maureen.

Yet Maureen identifies that “as a mother” the fear is “going to happen anyways” because “it’s always all our fault.” Her sentiment taps into something that many of the 95 mothers I spoke with raised regarding the schooling choices they make for their children. Across school type—homeschool and conventional—mothers are acutely aware of the significance of their decision for their child’s future. While all respondents prioritize quality in their school choice, what constitutes a quality education and a families’ ability to ensure their child receives it, is influenced by their material resources.

Along with caring for and homeschooling her daughter, Maureen also provides daily care to her elderly mother, who lives in a small apartment a few minutes away. She attributes the flexibility of their homeschooling schedule, and the support of the other homeschooling mothers in the region, as part of what makes homeschooling possible for her family. She can provide care for her mother while homeschooling her daughter and carpooling with other homeschoolers to get her daughter to the extra-curricular activities in which she is involved—weekly ballroom dance classes, and science and history classes through the homeschool co-op. In addition to the support she receives from other homeschooling mothers, Maureen also describes her husband as “behind” homeschooling but “not at all involved.” Yet she highlights that he supports the family financially so that she can be a full-time homeschooling mom.
Sharon

“My son had a bad experience; once he brought in a match from my matches at home. He was saying, ‘I wanted to bring in my match because I wanted to show my classmates and talk to them about it.’ He was suspended. They had him in the principal’s office. He was crying . . . they ostracized him. This is a good little boy. They made me feel like he was a terrorist. After that experience . . . he said, ‘I don’t want to go to school next year, Mom’ and I said ‘Okay.’”

I met Sharon at the café in the Hamilton shopping plaza, a few miles from her home, where she lives with her husband and two children. A predominately white and middle-class neighborhood, Hamilton has been home to the family for several years. Sharon, a middle class black woman in her mid-thirties, has a nine-year-old son and a four-year-old daughter. Her daily schedule revolves around providing care to her children, and the formal schooling of her son. This is her third year of homeschooling. She had been satisfied enough with the public school. She describes her positive experience with the school administration: “I was involved. The teachers were very kind to me. [I was] always in communication with the principal.” However, after the “bad experience . . . they [were] very quick to slap a label” on her son, making him feel like “he was a terrorist.” Sharon explains how she came to the decision to homeschool after this discriminatory encounter.

Unlike Maureen and other white homeschoolers, Sharon and the black homeschooling mothers I spoke with describe very different motivations for homeschooling. While some homeschool for religious reasons from the time their children are of school age, others, including Sharon, decided to homeschool in response to negative treatment their children experienced in school. Protecting their children from racial discrimination, after intervening in the school on the
child’s behalf, led many of these families to rely on the unpaid labor of mothers to educate their children at home, instead of risking additional discriminatory treatment from schools.

Why Homeschool?

School choice, or a set of policies and rhetoric around education programs that are intended to give families the option to choose the school their child attends (Berends 2015), is one of the most important topics in 21st century education debates. Yet, while homeschooling is one of the programs available, it remains on the margins of these debates. President Donald Trump’s appointment of Betsy DeVos as Education Secretary in 2016 holds significant implications for school choice as well as homeschooling. DeVos has emphasized her strong belief that families should be able to choose the best form of education for their children – whether public, private or home (Strupp 2017). This shows government support for making homeschooling a viable school choice option.

Yet misconceptions around homeschooling abound. U.S. news stories sensationalize these families as producing exceptional homeschool athletes or spelling bee champions. For example, Tim Tebow, Serena Williams, and Justin Jackson are high-profile athletes touted as exceptional homeschooled athletes (O’Donnell 2017). Other stories highlight horrendous cases of abuse by homeschooling families. For example, the recent high-profile case of the Turpin couple who were charged with abuse, torture and imprisonment of their thirteen children (Eltagouri 2018). While this and other high-profile cases raise concern regarding the state’s role in monitoring homeschooling families, these families
continue to primarily fly under the radar within social science research. These stories overlook the significance of homeschooling within contemporary family and education politics. Other misconceptions assume homeschoolers are primarily New Age hippies who don’t believe in the structure of schools, or evangelical Christians who homeschool to instill their religious beliefs. Despite these common assumptions, less than one fifth of homeschoolers (16%) report religious instruction as the most important reason for homeschooling (NCES 2015).

Survey data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that over the past two decades there has been substantial growth in homeschooling. In 2016, roughly 3.3% of the school age population were estimated to be homeschooling; this is up from 1.7% of the population in 1999 (NCES 2016c). To put this in context, this compares to the much more highly researched 5% of the school age population reported to be attending charter schools, while 9% attend private schools (NCES 2016a).

Besides growing in popularity and more resources available to homeschoolers, there are an increasing number of families of color choosing this option. In 2016 families of color made up 41% of the homeschool population, while 59% were non-Hispanic white; this is up from 25% families of color and 75% non-Hispanic white in 1999 (NCES 2016c).

Recent research finds black families may choose to homeschool to protect their children from racism within schools (Collom 2005; Fields-Smith and Kisura 2013; Levy 2009; Mazama and Lundy 2012). On the other hand, white families may homeschool to avoid more diverse schools (Levy 2009). Across race these families
are most often middle-class, highly-educated, two-parent households that follow traditional gender divisions of labor (Collom 2005; NCES 2016c). Yet, prior studies have focused on black homeschool families or white homeschool families, without making direct comparisons. In addition, these families have primarily remained separate from the abundance of research that examines conventional schoolers, whether public school, charter school, or private school.

Theoretical Frames

Schools and Choice

Although scholars find some real variation, overall homeschooling families appear to be primarily middle-class, two-parent heterosexual households. These demographics are due in part to the reliance on class resources and two-parent family forms that make providing the primary care and education for children possible (Green and Hoover-Dempsey 2007; Kapitulik 2011; Lois 2012; McDowell, Sanchez and Jones 2000; NCES 2013; Stevens 2001). Much of the scholarship from earlier decades focus on homeschoolers’ academic achievements and motivations, finding they divide into religious (largely Christian) and secular groups (Collom 2005; Stevens 2001), with estimates suggesting roughly one-third of the population indicate religious/moral as the most important reason for homeschooling (NCES 2015).\(^1\) Besides school environment (i.e. child safety, negative peer pressures), which both groups highlight as an important reason for homeschooling (NCES

\(^1\) The same study found that 83% of participants indicate religious/moral teachings as at least one of their reasons for choosing to home educate, suggesting the porousness of these categories (NCES 2015).
secular homeschoolers also view conventional schools as unable to cater to children’s individual needs (Collom 2005; Green and Hoover-Dempsey 2007). No research has compared mothering logics across white and black homeschooling families. Yet Jennifer Lois’s (2012) research with white homeschooling families finds, consistent with prior research, that mothers are the ones primarily doing the homeschooling. They deal with the tension of managing the time-intensive work of homeschooling by reflecting on their transitory role as homeschoolers, one that passes once children are grown (Lois 2012). In contrast, recent studies with black homeschoolers find these families choose to homeschool in part to protect their children from racism within the school system (Fields-Smith and Kisura 2013; Levy 2009; Mazama and Lundy 2012). These homeschooling families may also rely on traditional gender divisions of labor, yet the meaning behind this division of labor may vary, given how racialization has and continues to shape the cultural and structural patterns of family life. For example, black women have primarily integrated paid employment and childrearing, while class advantaged white women have primarily experienced separation between these spheres (Barnes 2008; Christopher 2013; Collins 1994; Dean et al 2013; Dow 2015). This begs the question of how black homeschooling mothers manage the intensity of being primary care provider and educator to their children and how they navigate paid employment and family life. In addition, we might speculate that white families may be choosing to homeschool to keep their children from diversity within schools (Levy 2009), while black families may homeschool to avoid racial discrimination (Mazama and Lundy 2012).
While much research examines how parents’ make conventional schooling choices, choosing traditional public, charter or private schools, focusing on white and black parents who homeschool provides an opportunity to examine how these logics are embedded within racialized, classed and gendered logics. Using social reproduction as a theoretical frame, I argue that the comparison across homeschool and conventional school contexts allows for a critical exploration that may point to unexamined ways that inequalities persist through schooling choices.

How parents make decisions around schooling are shaped by many factors including families’ housing, transportation, childcare, employment, as well as opinions and information from family members, friends and neighbors (Cucchiara 2013; Lareau 2014). Parents with the economic resources to do so “deliberately purchase homes in the best school district they can afford,” based on opinions and information gained through friend and family networks (Holmes 2002; Kimelberg 2014:207); but choosing schools through choice of residence is most common among white and suburban families (Goyette 2008). These parents understand their residential and school choices as an individual concern about their child’s academic and social need, yet these decisions often result in selecting whiter and wealthier schools labeled “good.” In doing so, however, a “white flight” effect reinforces the notion that students of color and low-income students attend schools labeled “bad” and are assumed to be low academic achievers (Roda and Wells 2013).

**Schools and Family**

Extensive research framed in social reproduction theory has documented that access to education remains vastly unequal, showing how parenting practices
and schooling experiences are shaped by social class, race, and gender to reproduce social hierarchies across groups (Bettie 2003; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Ferguson 2000; Lareau 2003). These scholars have shown how daily childrearing practices are shaped by parents’ race and class locations, passing along to children knowledge and skills that are perceived to be individual tastes but are based on social location.

Following Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Annette Lareau (2003) develops a class-based social reproduction parenting scheme; middle-class parents engage in “concerted cultivation,” while working-class/poor parents apply the “accomplishment of natural growth.” The research is especially significant in providing a concrete class-based model, showing how parent’s orientation towards children’s daily schedules, language use, and interactions in institutions are shaped by class in ways that lead to reproduction of class from one generation to the next. The result is that middle-class children develop an “emerging sense of entitlement” through these arrangements, while working-class and poor children develop an “emerging sense of constraint” in the face of dominant institutions (Lareau 2003:31).

Margaret Hagerman (2014) extends this class-based model by theorizing the social reproduction of whiteness. Through examining how white, class-privileged parents approach childrearing, her study demonstrates how social reproduction in parenting is also racialized. The findings show some parents engage a “colorblind approach” to childrearing by which families choose to send their children to predominately white schools, reinforcing a racial hierarchy that makes whiteness
invisible and normalizes the racial hierarchy, accomplished through the all-white context in which they choose to live. While in contrast some parents engage a “color-conscious approach” to childrearing that develops in children an awareness of their own racial privilege and/or the acts of racism occurring in their daily lives (Hagerman 2014).

Gender and Family

Drawing social reproduction research together with research on mothering shows how the supplementary schooling work involved in the social reproduction of class and race privileges, or in protecting children of color from racism in the school system, most often relies on women’s mothering work (Fields-Smith and Kisura 2013; Griffith and Smith 2005; Lois 2012; Mazama and Lundy 2012). There is a wealth of literature examining how intersections of race, class, and gender surface in family life in ways that maintain hierarchies such that certain groups receive advantages over others (Barnes 2008; Bermudez et al. 2012; Collins 1994; Christopher 2013; Damaske 2011; Dean et al 2013; Hays 1996; Jenkins 2005). Much of this work focuses on women’s relationship to paid employment and family life. This research shows how women understand their relationship to paid employment, often seen as something they do for the family, even when their employment is not necessary for the economic stability of the family (Damaske 2011). In fact, having financial stability already may make it easier for women to remain in the work force. Rather than economic factors being what propel women to move into the workforce, as commonly believed, women’s work pathways over the life course are more complicated than that. Yet across class and employment
status, women describe decisions around work and family as made for their family (Damaske 2011).

Much of this research focusing on women's relationship to paid employment and family life examines motherhood. Particularly influential across this literature is the mothering ideology of “intensive mothering.” The term was initially coined by Sharon Hays (1996) and described as a dominant childrearing ideology in which women negotiate a cultural contradiction between what appear to be mutually exclusive commitments to paid work—in which personal profit through competition is emphasized—and family, which urges women to give unselfishly of their time and resources to children. Hays (1996) and others drawing on this frame offer some race and class diversity in their sampling, finding the ideology persists, with some variation, across background (Blair-Loy 2003; Christopher 2012; Lois 2012).

For example, recent research finds variation towards an “extensive” mothering logic, by which women from across race, class, and employment status continue to engage an intensive mothering approach through remaining the “primary caregiver” of children by being ultimately responsible for them, yet delegate much of the work of childcare to other adults (Christopher 2012). African-American mothers may experience being seen as less accountable to the intensive mothering ideology due to institutionalized racism, which has historically required they work for pay to support their families. Given this history, African-American mothers may hold more integrative views on mothering and paid employment, while having to confront controlling images, such as the Welfare Queen and the Strong Black Woman, that constrain their choices around work and family life.
through others’ assumptions around black womanhood and work-family relations (Barnes 2008; Christopher 2013; Collins 1994; Damaske 2011; Dill 2008; Dow 2015).

This dissertation extends this research by making direct comparisons between homeschoolers and conventional schoolers across white and black families living within the same region. Through in-depth interviews with 95 white and black homeschooling and conventionally-schooling mothers, this dissertation contributes to current 21st century school choice debates by centering the stories of mothers who homeschool. Scholars have well documented the ways that race and class inequalities are reproduced through children’s schooling experiences (Bettie 2003; Lareau 2003; Ferguson 2000). However, as of yet no sociological research has compared homeschoolers to conventional schooling families, or made these direct comparisons across racial groups. This leaves unexamined how homeschooling families fit into broader conversations around schooling inequalities. This dissertation seeks to contribute to this under-studied area of research by examining the logics for why and how families make the schooling choices that they do. I address the following research questions:

1. What are the schooling logics of white homeschool respondents and how do they compare to their conventionally-schooling white counterparts?

2. What are the schooling logics of black homeschool respondents and how do they compare to their conventionally schooling black counterparts?

3. What sources of support do homeschool respondents rely on to manage the work of homeschooling?
4. Finally, across groups how does race, gender and social class condition families schooling logics?

Research Methods

The data for this dissertation draws from in-depth semi-structured interviews with a sample of middle-class white and black parents. I conducted interviews with a set of respondents across schooling (conventional and homeschool) and racial (black and white) groups, for a total of 95 interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAMPLING STRATEGY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White Conventional (n=14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Homeschool (n=21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Conventional (n=15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Homeschool (n=17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National/Interracial Homeschool (n=28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total = 95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1.1 Sampling Strategy*

Data Collection

Since prior research finds that there are many fewer homeschooling families than conventionally schooling families across the country, and given the lack of national or state level data on the homeschool population, I located the homeschool respondents in the first phase of data collection through contacting the eighteen homeschool organizations listed on a state-wide homeschooling website, associated with the seven counties in and around the metropolitan region of interest (Kapitulik 2011; Lois 2012; Stevens 2001). I contacted each of these organizations via email, asking organizers to send my study recruitment script to the organization’s email
listserv. Through these contacts I conducted respondent-driven sampling for other homeschool respondents living in the region.

To hold social class relatively constant across homeschool and conventional school contexts, making the school type and race the variables of focus, I located conventional schooling respondents through social networks, asking each homeschool respondent for contact information of friends who send their children to conventional school. Recent research suggests there are an increasing number of black homeschooling families in the country, and the interview data with homeschool respondents in the region supports this finding. However, because I found the black homeschool respondents were much less networked with other homeschoolers than white respondents, I found locating black homeschoolers to be more challenging. Therefore, in addition to sampling through initial contacts with regional homeschool organizations, I also contacted national black homeschool groups for contacts, as well as cultural and religious organizations in the region. As seen in Table 1.1, this led to interviews with 21 white homeschoolers, 17 black homeschoolers, 14 white conventional schoolers and 15 black conventional schoolers as well as an additional 28 interviews with homeschoolers from outside of the northeast or who identified their family as interracial.

Interviews

After receiving IRB approval for the study in spring of 2014, I began conducting interviews with homeschooling and conventionally schooling parents. I continued conducting interviews through the fall of 2016. After interviewing each homeschool respondent, I asked if they could recommend one or two conventionally
schooling families with whom they were friends, and who live nearby so that they could put me in touch for interviewing purposes. This led to interviews with conventionally schooling respondents who were connected to these homeschoolers’ social networks. By sampling for conventional schoolers through the social networks of homeschoolers, social class and race are held relatively constant across respondents, since families tend to have class and race homogenous friend groups (Lareau 2014). This makes school type the main variable of difference, allowing me to assess how similarly located families came to select these very different schooling choices for their children. Similar to other family and education scholars, I measure social class by considering household income, and the education and occupation of each respondent and her partner. I consider respondents as middle class when they hold at least a bachelor’s degree, and their partners and/or themselves work in jobs that demand at least a college degree (Damaske 2011; Lareau 2003). These jobs could include school teachers, lawyers, professors and small business owners. Upper-middle class women are those meeting the middle-class criteria and also earning an annual household income above $200,000 per year (Damaske 2011).

Gender shapes schooling choices and the work of schooling, which in turn, shapes the choice of respondents. Through the initial phase of data collection, I have found mothers, not fathers except in one case, to be the ones volunteering to be interviewed, and the ones described as doing the primary daily oversight—and in the case of homeschoolers, schooling—of their children.

Data Analysis
I audio recorded, transcribed, and then coded and analyzed all interviews using the qualitative research software, NVivo 10. I use an iterative approach, assessing the data with interest in my theoretical expectations while also remaining open to new meanings that emerge (Hesse-Biber 2006). I wrote descriptive and analytic memos throughout the research process, and developed codes while transcribing and analyzing data through multiple coding processes to confirm salient themes relative to my research questions (Saldana 2009).

As seen in Table 1.2 (below), homeschooling respondents vary more in their annual household income as compared to the conventional schooling families. This is not surprising given that seventeen of the 38 homeschooling families rely on a single earner income. Eighteen of the homeschooling mothers worked part-time, while three worked full-time. In contrast, 12 of the 29 conventional schooling respondents were employed full-time, while eight rely on a single earner income. Respondents had high levels of education; all homeschool respondents and 14 of the conventional school respondents had at least a bachelor’s degree.

**Study Context**

Of the 95 interviews I conducted, 67 were with white and black mothers living in one Northeastern region of the United States, while the remaining interviews were conducted with a diverse range of homeschooling mothers dispersed across the mid-Atlantic, Southern and Mid-western regions of the country. The northeastern metropolitan region that is the primary focus of this study has a complex history of racial schooling politics. Decades of middle-class white flight out of urban areas and into surrounding suburbs, which led to policy initiatives to
desegregate through busing is part of the fabric of the regions schooling history (Source 2013). State education policy of the early 1990s put into place a “controlled choice” model that divided the city into geographic zones that were structured to incorporate students from white and black neighborhoods into the same schools. The system has since been modified, yet the current model relies heavily on busing to transport students to schools across the city (Source 2013).² The system zones students by assignment and walk regions, meaning there are multiple options from which families can choose to send their children. In addition there are several schools that offer city-wide access to families who apply. There are a series of assignment priorities, including zoning and siblings already in the school, that influence which students get a slot.

The selected geographic region for this study covers seven counties that fall within the metropolitan area, roughly half the number of counties in the state (Source 2016). Conventional school districts include a region in which one or more conventional schools operate under the supervision of an appointed or selected school committee and superintendent. The state has over 500 school districts, with roughly half of these falling into the region of study. The majority of the districts serve a single city or town, although some small towns join together to form regional school districts. Since there are more than two hundred school districts

² All citations identified as “source” are studies I have kept blinded for confidentiality purposes, since given the small number of homeschooling families in the region compared to conventional schooling families. Specific details on city education policies and demographic information have also been minimized to preserve the confidentiality of respondents.
within the area of study, demographic information for each district is not provided here.

Within the city limits, just under half of the population are non-Hispanic white, just under a quarter are African American, just under one fifth are Hispanic, with Asians making up one tenth (U.S. Census Bureau 2016). This contrasts with the state composition, which is three quarters non-Hispanic white, roughly 12 percent Hispanic, with Asians and African Americans each making up less than 10 percent of the state population (U.S. Census Bureau 2016). The majority of the K-12 student body living within the city limits are low-income (56%), seen through eligibility for reduced or free lunch, Transitional Aid to Families, or food stamp eligibility (Source 2017). While study respondents are recruited from the seven districts within and around the city, given that homeschoolers tend to be middle-class, the majority of respondents live outside of the city limits in suburban neighborhoods that are part of the greater metropolitan area.
| Table 1.2 All Respondent Demographics |

Dissertation Overview: Towards an Intersectional Framework
This dissertation offers theoretical contributions to education and family scholarship. By making a direct comparison between homeschoolers and conventional schoolers across white and black families, this study finds that schooling decisions—both homeschool and conventional school—drawn on the intensive social reproduction work of mothers. In addition, decisions around schooling are shaped by racialized experiences of family (i.e. importance of nuclear and extended family) and schools (i.e. bullying and discrimination). These experiences reflect the inequalities that families—across schooling type—confront in their daily lives.

My research finds black and white mothers—both conventional school and homeschool—are particularly burdened with this responsibility, with women’s narratives reflecting the intensive work they do to navigate schooling options, while the meaning and experience of this work is different for white and black mothers. The first two empirical chapters examine why families homeschool, or how they understand their schooling choices. The first chapter focuses on white mothers schooling logics, whether conventional school or homeschool. Mothers explain decisions that prioritize schools that “fit best” the individual attributes they associate with their child, yet also places them in predominately white academic settings. In contrast, they prioritize interracial socialization for non-academic settings. This chapter shows how individual “choices” around schooling, are embedded in racial logics that reproduce racial segregation in schooling.

The second empirical chapter focuses on black mothers schooling decisions for both homeschoolers and conventional schoolers. Many black respondents
explain their decisions as working to protect their children from racial discrimination experienced in schools, whether through intervening on the child’s behalf, transferring schools, or homeschooling. These choices are shaped by marital status, education, and religiosity. While roughly half of the black respondents’ homeschool for religious reasons, the other half report experiencing racial bias within conventional schools as their reason for homeschooling, drawing on class resources to carry out this decision. Their conventionally schooling counterparts also draw on material resources to intervene and transfer their child to a different school, leaving those most marginalized to deal with racial discrimination on their own. This suggests the responsibility of protecting children from discrimination falls on individual families, particularly mothers. These findings highlight the real implications of school choice initiatives in the lives of middle class black families, and how homeschooling is one strategy these families use to avoid racial discrimination in conventional schools. The findings from both chapter highlight what I refer to as “selective racialization,” through which both black and white respondents emphasize race as guiding certain aspects of their schooling logic, while prioritizing other variables in other aspects of their decision.

The third empirical chapter examines how black and white homeschoolers make sense of the rewards and challenges they associate with homeschooling, and how they manage these challenges through seeking familial support. Support for homeschooling is unequally accessible. Most white families find their primary support through other white homeschoolers, who share important information about homeschooling. Yet they report little homeschool support from extended kin.
In contrast, while some black homeschoolers find support through the mostly white homeschoolers in the region, others express isolation from homeschoolers and instead rely on extended kin to navigate homeschooling as a black family. This chapter shows how race and gender shapes homeschoolers relationships with extended family, as well as their unequal access to homeschool supports.

These findings contribution to gender, race, education and family scholarship by showing that schooling decisions—both homeschool and conventional school—rely on the social reproduction work of mothers. In addition, decisions about schooling are shaped by racialized experiences and ideas about family (i.e. importance of nuclear and extended family) and schools (i.e. bullying and school shootings). These ideas and experiences reflect inequalities that families—across schooling type—confront and reproduce in their daily lives.
CHAPTER 2

“EVERYBODY JUST WANTS WHAT’S BEST FOR THEIR KID”: WHITE MOTHERS’ SCHOOLING LOGICS

How does race shape white American parents’ schooling decisions? As the number of white school age children declines, examining how these children's parents’ make sense of their schooling options, and how these logics may be shaped by race remains important. While the number of white students has declined overall from 28.3 million in 2004 to 24.9 million today, the number of Hispanic students have grown substantially from 9.3 to 12.8 million (NCES 2017). Much research has focused on the racialization of schooling decisions among white public schooling families (Hagerman 2014; Lareau and Goyette 2014; Orfield and Frankenberg 2013; Sikkink and Emerson 2008; Roda and Wells 2013), yet whites’ decisions to opt their child out of public schools has been less thoroughly examined.

Particularly absent from the research are those white families who choose to homeschool. Although the proportion of white homeschooling families are comparable to that of white public schooling families—just under 60% of all students (NCES 2017)—less research examines these families, or how their logics compare to their public schooling counterparts. This chapter takes up this investigation by comparing the schooling logics of a group of white homeschooling mothers to their white public schooling counterparts living in the same northeastern metropolitan region.
Racial segregation contributes to U.S. schooling inequalities. Schools composed predominately of white students tend to have greater material resources and provide advantages to students that predominately black schools do not, contributing to racial inequalities (Billingham and Hunt 2016; Frankenberg 2013; Massey and Fischer 2006). White students are least likely to attend high-poverty public schools; in 2014 just seven per cent of white public school students attended high-poverty public schools, compared to forty-five per cent of black students and forty-six per cent of Latino students (NCES 2017). Yet while most school age children continue to attend public schools, the demographic composition of public schools has been changing; in just ten years, from 2003 to 2013, white students decreased from fifty-nine per cent to fifty per cent nationally, while Latino students increased from nineteen per cent to twenty-five per cent, while other racial groups remained constant (NCES 2017).

How do these shifts shape the schooling logics of families? Much research has focused on public charter schools (Bankston et al. 2013; Jennings 2010; Johnston 2014; Kleitz et al. 2000; Renzulli, Parrott and Beattie 2011), and private schools

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3 While there are noted benefits of integration for minimizing racial inequality in schools, these benefits are also contested (Lewis et al. 2015).
4 High-poverty public schools are those with seventy-five per cent or more of its students eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL). FRPL is a government measure and includes children from families with annual incomes that are 130 per cent to 185 per cent below the poverty line (NCES 2017).
5 The likelihood of attending high-poverty public schools for other racial groups is also relatively high: thirty-three per cent of multi-racial students, twenty-five per cent of American Indian/Alaska Native students, and eighteen per cent of Asian/Pacific Islander students (NCES 2017).
6 Public charter schools are defined as publicly funded schools that are governed by a group or organization under the legislation of the state or district (NCES 2017).
(Bankston and Caldas 2000; Cowen et al. 2013; Davies and Quirke 2007; Goldring and Phillips 2008), while less research has examined homeschools. However, especially give the changing racial composition of student enrollment homeschools remain an important alternative to public school, yet often left out of school choice research. Homeschoolers are estimated to comprise 3.3 per cent of the school age population (NCES 2016c). In contrast, while more extensively researched, charters educate only slightly more students than homeschools, at just under 5 per cent of the student population, while private schools comprise just under 10 per cent of the student population (NCES 2016c). In sum, an increasing number of families, across race, are opting out of public schools to homeschool. While some research has examined homeschoolers motivations and experiences (Fields-Smith and Kisura 2013; Lois 2012; Mazama and Lundy 2012; Stevens 2001), left unexamined is how motivations may be racialized, particularly for whites, and how this compares to their white public schooling counterparts. This comparison is the focus of this chapter, and is especially relevant assuming homeschoolers are making decisions based on the schooling options in their region.

In this chapter, I argue that respondents use “selective racialization” logics to talk about their schooling choices. Specifically, parents explain prioritizing “best fit” by emphasizing individual attributes of their child’s particular learning or behavioral style, which also leads to their child attending predominately white schools. In contrast, they often prioritize interracial socialization for non-academic extra-curricular activities. By examining homeschoolers’ choices, these findings build on scholarship examining how whites use colorblind logics, or taken for
granted understandings that make the racial hierarchy appear non-racial, as opposed to embedded in a history of racial oppression (Bonilla-Silva 2006; DiTomaso, Parks-Yancy, and Post 2011; Ferber 1998; Gallagher 2003; Hagerman 2014; Hughey 2009). Like studies of non-homeschool whites’ residential and schooling decisions (Cucchiara 2013; Roda and Wells 2013), these findings empirically demonstrate how selective-ness in homeschoolers choices around when race is prioritized, or not, further contributes to explanations for how racial segregation is preserved in schools.

Racial Logics and Schooling

This study draws from whiteness scholarship, which shows why studying whites is crucial for working to mitigate racial inequality (Frankenberg 2001; Hagerman 2014; Hartigan 2010; Hughey 2009; Lewis 2004; Twine and Gallagher 2008). Whiteness refers to the collection of meanings and practices that justifies whites as superior to those marked as nonwhite (Hughey 2009). Scholars show how whites’ schooling decisions often engage colorblind racial logics that reinforce the racial status quo and racial segregation (Billingham and Hunt 2016; Hagerman 2014; Roda and Wells 2013). Yet they often use non-racial logics to explain their decisions, pointing to housing, transportation, childcare, employment, and opinions of family members and friends as the primary influencing factors. Regardless of a schools’ academic performance, scholars find that higher racial minority composition of school districts, particularly black students, negatively influences the number of white middle-class families sending their children to the public schools in the district (Bankston and Caldas 2000; Billingham and Hunt 2016; Dougherty et al.
Together this research shows how whites schooling decisions maintain racial segregation and inequality. Besides contributing to a more equal distribution of resources across schools, scholars find that increased contact with students of color proves to be a significant indicator of the racial views that whites hold (Hagerman 2014; McClelland and Linnander 2006). This is especially the case for their views of blacks, suggesting that integrated schools can increase whites’ awareness of existing racial injustices. For example, whites who express colorblind views tend to support less diversity-driven affirmation action policies, less awareness of the ways that whiteness provides daily privileges in their lives, while making neighborhood and schooling choices that tend to support racial segregation (Hagerman 2014; Billingham and Hunt 2016; Bunyasi 2015). In contrast, whites choosing integrated neighborhoods and schools, tend to be more aware of contemporary racism and their own racial privilege, suggesting racial inequalities at the ideological level may result (Hagerman 2014). Yet other racial inequalities surface or persist in integrated schools (Lewis and Diamond 2015).

A portion of the white school age population that has been left primarily unexamined in these race and schooling studies are homeschoolers. Yet given the growing number of white families choosing this option, and the segregating effects it may have (Levy 2009; NCES 2015), suggests closer examination of this group is important. Are homeschoolers’ decisions racially motivated? How do their decisions correspond to racial schooling inequalities in their region? Along with being primarily white, homeschoolers are most often middle-class, relying on the supports
of a two-parent household with one parent in paid employment, while the second parent homeschools (Green and Hoover-Dempsey 2007; Lois 2012; Stevens 2001). Yet direct comparisons of white homeschoolers’ racial schooling logics, to the schooling logics of their public schooling counterparts, remains unexamined.

This comparison offers contributions to the race and education research. We may know less about homeschooling families than any other schooling group in part because homeschool reporting varies significantly by state. Some states have no regulations, others involve annual approval of homeschool curricula, qualification of parents as teachers, home visits by officials, test-based evaluations and/or evaluations by certified teachers (HSLDA 2016). School districts also vary in their enforcement of the law. This variation means that compared to other schooling options, we have minimal data on homeschoolers. Yet these families are not making the decision to homeschool in a vacuum. Rather, their decisions are likely shaped by the structural, cultural, and educational context of their region. Thus, examining how white homeschoolers make sense of their schooling choices and how this compares to their public schooling counterparts, offers contributions to the race and education scholarship. It is this comparison that is the focus of this chapter.

The data drawn on in this chapter comes from in-depth interviews with white families living in the Northeastern United States. The region has a complicated history of racial politics around schooling. Decades of middle-class white flight out of urban areas and into surrounding suburbs, which led to policy initiatives to desegregate through busing is part of the fabric of the region’s schooling history.
State education policy of the early 1990s put into place a “controlled choice” model that divided the city into geographic zones that were structured to incorporate students from white and black neighborhoods into the same schools, while more recent policies have been modified, yet remain reliant on busing to transport students to schools across the city (Source 2013). The system zones students by assignment and walk regions, meaning there are options from which families can choose to send their children. In addition, there are several schools that offer city-wide access to families who apply, with a series of assignment priorities (zoning, siblings already in schools), that influence which students get a slot.

Methods

Drawing from interview data with 21 white homeschooling and 14 white public schooling mothers, I address the following research questions: (1) how do racial logics shape white homeschooling parents schooling decisions, (2) how is this similar and/or distinct from the racial logics of white public schooling parents, and (3) how do these logics reflect navigation of racial schooling dynamics within the region? The data for this study is part of a larger in-depth study in which from January 2014 through October 2016 I conducted ninety-five interviews with homeschooling and public schooling parents from across the United States.

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All citations identified as “source” are studies kept blinded for confidentiality purposes, given the limited number of homeschoolers compared to public schoolers in the region. Specific details on city education policies and demographic information have also been minimized for this reason.
The interviews lasted between thirty to ninety minutes, with most averaging sixty minutes. I asked parents questions about their decisions around schooling their children. This included detailed questions about daily schedules, extra-curricular involvement, division of household labor, reasons for selecting the schooling type, demographics and influences of social networks, thoughts around parenting and its relationship to education. I also asked about respondents’ employment history, partner status, partners’ employment history, and basic demographic information. I interviewed respondents in the location of their choosing, which for fourteen respondents was a coffee shop, café, or park located near their home. Eleven other respondents invited me to conduct interviews in their home, three at their place of work, and seven via Skype/telephone.

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and then coded and analyzed using the qualitative research software NVivo 10. Following Hesse-Biber’s (2006) guidelines for analyzing interview data, I took an iterative approach in the interviewing, transcribing, coding and analyzing process; I developed codes surfacing from the data, while also examining the data for themes developed in prior studies of whites’ schooling experiences (Hagerman 2014). After conducting interviews, I took field notes on prominent themes, connections to the literature, or methodological reflections. I also wrote detailed notes while transcribing the interviews, as I found additional themes surfacing across transcripts. The collection of notes initiated the coding process, which further developed into a coding scheme that included four codes I develop in this paper: best fit, interracial values, academic, and non-academic settings.
While the recruitment script asked to interview parents, not surprisingly, given the existing research that indicates mothers are providing the majority of work around daily care and schooling (Griffith and Smith 2005; Lois 2012), all but one of the homeschool and public school respondents in this sample are women. Thirty-three respondents were married in heterosexual relationships at the time of the interview. Two homeschooling respondents were in single-headed households; one was widowed, and another had never been married. Following from race and schooling research, social class was measured by considering household income, and the education and occupation of each respondent and their partner. Over two thirds of respondents (twenty-six) are classified as middle-class, while two (exclusively homeschoolers) fell into an upper-middle class category, and eight (four homeschool and three public school) fell into the working-class category. I categorize respondents as middle class when they held at least a bachelor’s degree, and their partners and/or themselves worked in jobs that demanded at least a college degree, such as teacher, lawyer, professor or small business owner (Lareau and Goyette 2014). Working-class parents were those who did not meet all of the middle-class criteria, while upper-middle class parents were those meeting this criteria and also earning above $200,000 per year (see Table 2.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Homeschool (n=21)</th>
<th>Conventional (n=14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>90% (19)</td>
<td>100% (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never Married/Widowed</td>
<td>10% (2)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>67% (14)</td>
<td>29% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular</td>
<td>33% (7)</td>
<td>71% (10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As seen in Table 2.1, homeschooling families varied more in their annual household income as compared to public schooling families. The two homeschool respondents falling into the lowest income bracket were single-parents. Overall parents had high levels of education. All homeschool respondents and most (ten) public school respondents had at least a bachelor’s degree, with many also having a graduate degree. All thirty-five of the respondents identified as white or Caucasian. Respondents had anywhere from one to six children who varied in age from infant to eighteen, with each respondent having at least one child between the ages of five and eighteen. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and personal details were withheld to ensure anonymity.

Findings

Parents in this study were asked why and how they made the choices they did around schooling their children. Responses reflect two central themes which I discuss here. The first, focuses on academic choices through which respondents emphasize prioritizing “fit,” based on individual attributes of their child’s particular learning or behavioral style, and also leads their child to attend predominately
white schools. The second theme focuses on non-academic choices through which respondents expressed value in children’s interracial socialization, which is not reflected through their schooling choice, yet many parents sought through non-academic extra-curricular activities. The section concludes by suggesting implications of these findings for racial segregation and inequality.

**Academic Choices and “Best Fit”**

Public schooling and homeschooling parents alike highlight “best fit” as a driving force behind their schooling decision. For example, Janet, a public schooling mother with two children explained:

> I think everybody just wants what’s best for their kid and it’s hard to find out what fits. We have friends in town, two of them are in private school and two of them are in public school; they are just figuring out what’s the best fit for their kids.

Janet’s emphasis is on the importance of making a school choice that caters to the individual learning needs of the child. She draws on her friend as a positive example to show how parents are doing the best by their child, in this case by sending them to different schools—one kid to private school and one kid to public school. This demonstrates prioritizing each child by catering the school choice to the idiosyncrasies of the child. Scholars show how U.S. education policy and rhetoric emphasize parental choice in schooling to position parents as consumers in a free market in which competition is meant to improve the quality of education, yet fails to trouble how access to these choices are unequal (Cucchiara 2013; Davies and Quirke 2007; Goldring and Phillips 2008; Holmes 2002; Kantor and Lowe 2006; Lareau and Goyette 2014; Roda and Wells 2013). Consistent with other research of
non-homeschooling whites, respondents reflect logics that draw from this choice rhetoric.

A similar example is from Clara, who explained her satisfaction with the public school by emphasizing how the school meets each of her sons’ learning needs:

Teacher wise I think they’re [public school] very solid. Michael has had great teachers and that’s really good for what he needs. . . Every year you fill in a form by the end of the year to say what your child’s strengths and weaknesses [are], where he should be going the next year. What kind of teacher would fit well with him and so forth and then they match profiles up with the teachers that they have . . . they’ve been very accurate so far.

Like Janet, Clara emphasizes the importance of selecting a school that “fits” the child. She expresses satisfaction in the school because it has a system for distributing students to different classrooms and teachers based on fit between teacher and student. For Clara, this “fit” comes through the school working to cater to each child’s individual learning style. Another public schooling parent, Jill, put it this way: “I think I’m doing the best for my kids by my approach [to public school].”

This “best fit” narrative was particularly apparent among participants—like Janet alluded—who were selecting different schools for different kids, since a single school may not be able to accommodate the learning or behavioral styles of each child. Joan is one such example. She demonstrates how she and her husband prioritized “fit” in their decision to homeschool their older son, while keeping their younger son in school:

We kept trying to work with the school to almost make it a force fit. Third grade it was obvious, it wasn’t a very good fit. At first I thought, "oh he's the youngest in the class" he just didn't feel very good about himself so I thought "well we'll just give him a year off the grid. . . We'll also take the year
to get to know him a little better, in terms of his academic style and then we can find a school that better fits.

Joan suggests it was noticing her child’s low self-esteem that led her to consider other options, and eventually decide to homeschool. Being unfamiliar with homeschooling led her to begin under temporary terms, as a way of giving her and her husband time to figure out the right “fit” for their son. For Joan, part of reason to start homeschooling was to see his day-to-day learning process. She felt this would give her more information to ensure she selected a school that was better suited to him. This was unlike when he was in public school and she was piecing together his experience through his and his teacher’s descriptions. Joan found homeschooling to suit her son so well that they decided to continue. Yet she felt very differently about the “best fit” for her younger son. She described him as suited to public schooling because he “likes having his group of friends from school . . . and likes having teachers and rules.” Based on the same sources of information—child’s and teacher’s account—Joan felt it best to keep her younger son in school, both for his enjoyment of the social scene as well as his responsiveness to teachers and rules. By choosing these two different options, Joan prioritizes catering her decision to each child.

Parents who were solely homeschooling also highlight “best fit” as the priority in their decision making. For example, Michelle, points to education quality concerns (lack of individualized learning) at the Montessori school as leading to her homeschool decision:

We wound up feeling sometimes very frustrated that it [Montessori school] wasn’t always follow the child . . . and in our case, our daughter [is] not a round peg to fit into a round hole . . . she’s exceptionally gifted and so by
the end of third grade it just felt like so much energy that I might as well do this thing myself.

Michelle emphasizes her daughter’s individual learning style—academic exceptionalism—as what ultimately led her to decide to homeschool. Like Joan (from above), Michelle expresses spending several months contemplating the decision to pull their child out of the conventional school to homeschool. Ultimately both respondents explain their dissatisfaction with conventional school outweighs the uncertainty of homeschooling. For Joan, the uncertainty surfaces around what the best schooling alternative might be, while Michelle uses the metaphor of her daughter not being a “round peg” to fit into the “round hole” of school, to capture the sentiment that schools and schooling should fit each child, not the other way around.

Emily, a homeschooling mother of five, also emphasized individualized learning as her priority and what led her to opt out of the local public school:

That’s one thing that’s cool about homeschooling is that you learn that there is no one size fits all … people are organic beings and as such, everyone needs a special education … every child deserves a special education … so that’s where the schools fail.

Like Michelle, Emily suggests conventional schools fail by being a “one size fits all” model and ignoring the “special education” that every child deserves. This emphasis on catering to the individual child is what she prioritized in her decision to homeschool all five of her children. Left unsaid are the ways that giving every child a “special education” is unequally accessible to all families. Like Roda (2015) demonstrates in her study with whites of children enrolled in Gifted and Talented programs in New York City Public Schools, emphasis on individualized learning and
the policies that support them, may preserve schooling segregation given inequalities in access to choice.

Victoria provides another “best fit” explanation for homeschooling her daughter:

I clearly want the best for my daughter by way of her education and I truly feel as though I’m giving her that [by homeschooling]... As mothers [we] want nothing but the best for our children... I know many women who send their children to daycare, pre-school and that’s fine if that’s what works with their family... I know for myself that [homeschooling] is what is true to me and my family.

Victoria explains “best fit” through emphasizing the role of the parent in sorting this out for their child. Rather than suggesting that one schooling option is best suited for catering to children’s varied learning styles, she suggests that parents (or mothers) know what is best. She feels she is doing the best for her daughter by homeschooling, while explaining how some parents use the same logic to send their kids to school.

Most of the other respondents expressed similar narratives about prioritizing “best fit,” or individual attributes. Left out were the material factors—the high cost of homes in districts with highly ranked public schools or the income and resources needed to support homeschooling—that shape who has access to these schooling choices, and that make prioritizing “best fit” unequally accessible (Lareau and Goyette 2014). This is not to say that respondents did not discuss the resources that went into their choices; many homeschoolers expressed concern in the costs of curricula and homeschool programs, while some public schoolers considered private schools but abandoned the option due to cost. Yet most respondents explained “best fit” as guiding their decisions. Through prioritizing fit
by focusing on individual attributes, the material differences that shaped these schooling decisions are obscured.

Non-Academic Choices and Interracial Settings

In this next section, I examine respondents’ schooling choices in relation to their neighborhood and social networks. The selected geographic region for this study includes seven counties that fall within the metropolitan area and is highly segregated both by race and class. Within the city limits the population is predominately families of color and low-income, the surrounding suburbs are predominately middle-class and white, with only 10 percent Hispanic, while Asians and African Americans each make up less than 10 percent (US Census Bureau 2010). Study respondents were recruited from the seven districts within and around the city, with all but 2 (both homeschoolers) living outside of the city limits in suburban neighborhoods that are part of the greater metropolitan area. Because estimates indicate that the number of homeschoolers in the region are 7.6 per thousand students, I recruited respondents over this wide area to ensure comparable numbers of homeschoolers and public schoolers participated in the study (SDESE 2016). This allowed for careful examination of how decisions to homeschool fit within the larger schooling context of the region.

In response to questions regarding the demographics of their neighborhoods, and social networks, respondents described mostly white academic spaces, while often prioritizing interracial non-academic settings. Through these descriptions,

8 Low-income is measured by schools having a majority of students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch (Lareau and Goyette 2014; Source 2013; NCES 2017).
respondents further explained their schooling choices. For example, Janet, the public schooling parent from above, explained why her family chose to move from Greenville, to Redding:

[At Greenville public school] there just wasn't a lot of parental involvement... they didn't have a lot of peers that could challenge them and the teachers were really teaching to the test. Even though we were very fortunate to have wonderful teachers, they were teaching to the bottom half of the class cause that's where the need was. So we made the decision to move... so we looked into two options... should we move or should we put the kids in private school? And we made the decision to move to a school system that had better schools rather than pay [for private schools].

Janet describes moving from Greenville to Redding for the schools. She points to lack of quality education—teaching to the test, minimal parental involvement, not academically motivated peers—as their reason for investigating other schooling options. While she explains considering private school, she and her husband decided it was more affordable to move to a different school district than to pay the high cost of private school tuition. While her discussion is not overtly about race, the move involved going from a more racially diverse school to one that is predominately white; Greenville public schools are 55% white, while Redding is 73% white (SDESE 2016). This may reflect aspects of colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2006), when choices are shaped by racialized understandings of who values education, and what kinds of classroom environments are conducive to learning. For example, Janet explained how she saw the different demographics of these schools shaping her children’s experience:

[It’s] very different here than it was in Greenville. .. [In Greenville] ... their classrooms kind of looked like the United Nations, which I really liked... Here in Redding it’s primarily Caucasian. .. Within [our older daughter’s] group, [it is] mostly Caucasian, middle to upper middle class. In Greenville,
we were probably the most educated of her classmates and . . . some of her
friends struggled economically as well.

Janet’s understanding of education quality, conflicts with the value she places
on interracial classrooms. Yet despite this, she and other parents are “selective”
around when they prioritize interracial settings. For most respondents prioritizing
“best fit” leads to white academic settings, despite the value placed on racial
diversity.

Wendy is also a public schooling parent living in Redding. She explained the
demographics of her children’s peers and how it shapes their schooling experiences:

The public schools are great in terms of academics . . . It's mostly white
with probably ten percent Asian . . . and then ninety percent white. A very
small minority are black or Hispanic. We joined the Y for a long time because,
my major was international relations when I was in school and I’ve always
felt compelled to give them a taste of other cultures. They do get some of the
Asian cultures in school, but it’s important for me because of the
demographics to provide them more of a non-white bread feel to their lives.

Like Janet, Wendy is satisfied with the academics of the Redding public
schools, while the drawbacks are the lack of racial diversity since the school is
predominately white. She does not suggest it is the whiteness of the school that
makes the academics “great,” but rather an inadvertent consequence. To make-up
for the whiteness of their school, Wendy has sought interracial non-academic
activities for her children, enrolling them in sports programs at the local YMCA,
which draws from Redding and the predominately Latino neighboring town (SDESE
2016).

While some parents reconcile their value in racial diversity by selecting to
enroll their children in interracial non-academic settings, a few chose instead to
send their children to more integrated schools. For example, Abby explained that
she and her family moved to Riverview because of the racial diversity and quality of the public schools. Despite this, she still used school choice to move her three children from their assigned neighborhood public school, to a different public school in their community:

Once everybody hit kindergarten age, all three kids, in succession, started at our local public school. We were zoned for one of them. . . and we actually petitioned to go to the one that’s slightly physically closer to us. But our neighbor, who was a long time educator said “there are more educated parents at this other one. Go there.” Both schools have very, very large percentages of recently immigrated Chinese Asian immigrants. Real low-incomes, a lot of free lunch. All of which is great, and has been a real plus for our kids. The kind of white people portion of the school we left was from much rougher neighborhoods and the white people portion of the school we went into tended to be more working class and educated, a few more doctors, lawyers.

Similar to Janet and Wendy, Abby’s logic demonstrates a racialized logic around who values education, drawing on the model minority myth of Asian Americans (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Yet the logic also demonstrates racial logics intersecting with class. Like Janet, who saw real value in the racial diversity of Greenville schools but chose not to stay, Abby describes it as a benefit for her children to go to school with low-income Chinese students. What led her to switch neighborhood schools was the class composition of the white students. The school her children were originally zoned for is composed of low-income white students, while the school they switched to had a much larger portion of middle-class white families along with Chinese American students.

White homeschooling parents use a similar logic that places their children in mostly white academic settings, while preferring interracial non-academic settings. For example, Kimberly, explains how she came to the decision to homeschool,
despite her initial concern about the whiteness of homeschooling groups in the region:

I was worried about the role of diversity in home educating. That was a concern that I had initially, but I’m no longer concerned about that because my kids are getting diverse people through homeschooling and through city activities... Also a lot of the private [schools] seem completely homogenous [in terms of] race... and class. I think race and class diversity are really valuable, but obviously I don't think it’s a priority that everybody can access. Because there are towns in the state for example that are ninety seven percent white. Clearly it’s not a priority for everybody, homeschooling or not.

Kimberly negotiates the lack of racial diversity, which she sees as a shortcoming of homeschooling, by choosing to live in a racially diverse neighborhood. Her children are involved in city-wide sport programs so that they can interact with children of color. Her concern with the public schools’ educational quality, which she describes as a lack of “individualized learning” and “time efficiency,” outweighs the value she places on providing her children a racially diverse classroom. Homeschooling allows her to cater her program to each child, while spending fewer hours overall on school-work. Yet, different from other homeschoolers, she also expresses some ambivalence in her choice, recognizing that it contributes to the racial segregation in the public schools, which are just thirty percent white (SDESE 2016). The fact that white non-homeschooling families also often make choices that reproduce racial segregation by living in predominately white districts, or paying to send their children to private schools, seems to reassure her decision to homeschool.

Similarly, Mary explained how the demographics of her sons’ peers shaped their experiences:
I think it would drive me bonkers if we were only around white people all the time. . . we go to the cathedral in Leeds . . . Actually the English speaking white population is in the minority, there are a lot of native Africans. . . and then a huge Hispanic-Spanish speaking population. Our cathedral is actually split between Spanish speaking masses and English speaking masses. . . All the homeschoolers are white. Being a part of that [church] community is in many ways like our primary social group. . . However, it’s true that we’re closest with a handful of families that are white and homeschooling. The bottom line and probably the reason we chose to go to that church was like, I just don’t want my kids to feel like "wow, people of color.”

Mary expresses value in her family interacting with people of color. Yet, she chose to homeschool, which puts the family in a predominately white school setting. To accommodate this, she chose to attend a racially diverse church in a different district. These examples reflect a central feature of colorblindness that makes racial identity appear to be a matter of individual choice (Bonilla-Silva 2006), and obscures how whites remain unmarked racially, while picking and choosing when to experience interracial spaces.

Michelle also explained how the decision to homeschool led to their white school setting:

So we live in a really white area. I’m going to tell you right now. White . . . One of the things at the Montessori that we did like was the mix of ethnicities because you would find Indian and Asian families who were also super on board with Montessori . . . and she has kept in touch with several of those friends . . . If you are really looking for a count though, I would say one Indian friend and the rest white but fifty percent girls and fifty percent boys. She definitely enjoys both genders.

Michelle valued the “mix of ethnicities” at the Montessori school her daughter attended before homeschooling. While the homeschool group and neighborhood are predominately white, Michelle minimizes the significance of this in her decision to homeschool by suggesting that education quality concerns—lack
of individualized learning—at the Montessori school were what pushed her to homeschool. Like the paradox that Lewis and Diamond (2015) uncover in their study with whites in an integrated suburban high school, many respondents simultaneously hold racially progressive views, while preferring their children experience academic classrooms that are predominately white. They express value in racial integration, yet end up choosing predominately white academic settings.

In reflecting on how the demographics of her son’s social networks shape his experience, Sarah expressed:

I mean we live in Elmford for that reason; I don’t want to be in a very gentrified area where it’s all white and I feel like that really restricts his experiences and ability to connect with others... I do think as far as homeschooling goes, I wish it was a bit more diverse, it’s mainly white.

Like other parents, Sarah values racial diversity. Yet she is selective in which context she chooses her son to experience interracial settings. When it comes to academics she uses an individualized logic to explain her white schooling decision.

Like Kimberly and Abby, Sarah has decided to live in a racially integrated neighborhood. Elmford is a predominately black neighborhood with a school district that is less than fourteen per cent white (SDESE 2016). Despite choosing the neighborhood for the racial diversity, she decides to homeschool her son for the education quality—individualized program—which places him in a nearly all white homeschool community.

These examples reflect a central feature of colorblindness that makes racial identity appear to be a matter of individual choice (Bonilla-Silva 2006), similar to the way that white Irish today may emphasize their ethnicity on St. Patty’s day, while receiving no social or material consequences for their “ethnic-ness” (Gallagher
2003; Waters 1990). This obscures how whites remain unmarked racially, while picking and choosing when to experience racially diverse settings. Both homeschool and public school parents’ engaged this colorblind logic. They pick and choose when and where to place their children in interracial settings, opting in when benefitting their child (extra-curricular settings), while opting out when holding potential consequences (academic settings). This is not to suggest that parents were unaware of the ways that their choices impact the segregation in the region, nor to suggest that integrating schools is the “silver bullet” for solving race and class disparities in U.S. schooling. Rather, this study uncovers how whiteness is operating at the ideological level, through the logics of homeschoolers, and how this compares to the logics of their public schooling counterparts. Through this examination of schooling logics, we can further understand how racial structures are negotiated and maintained.

Discussion

This study shows how white homeschooling and public schooling parents alike use similar logics of “selective racialization” when talking about their schooling choices. Specifically, parents explain prioritizing “best fit” by emphasizing individual attributes of their child’s particular learning or behavioral style, which also leads to their child attending predominately white schools. Yet parents also often prioritize interracial interactions through non-academic settings. This builds on aspects of Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) colorblind logic that links the persistence of racial discrimination through whites’ individual choices being disconnected from structural arrangements. Extending studies of white families’ non-homeschooling
decisions shows how racial segregation persists (Bankston and Caldas 2000; Billingham and Hunt 2016; Dougherty et al. 2009; Emerson, Chai, and Yancey 2001; Frankenberg 2013). These findings also demonstrate how homeschooling is part of this story. Both groups are selective in their choices, depending on the setting—whether academic or not. It is this selective-ness in which race is prioritized, or not, that contributes to existing explanations for how racial segregation is preserved in schools.

These findings suggest that homeschooling is just one of many schooling choices that white parents consider. Given their increasing numbers, with estimates comparable to those children attending charter schools (NCES 2017; NCES 2015), these findings support homeschoolers being included in future studies concerned with racial inequalities in U.S. education. As is the case with qualitative research, findings are not generalizable, yet by being regionally specific, this study allows for a deeper analysis of the ways that homeschool and public school families navigate school choice when faced with the same regional options.

Although school age children are increasingly racially diverse, schools remain segregated. The negative outcomes of racial segregation in schooling for all students are well documented (Billingham and Hunt 2016). Racial segregation is linked to increased colorblind logics among whites (Hagerman 2014), and the unequal distribution of material resources between predominately white and predominately black schools. This results in situating predominately white schools with greater material resources than predominately black schools (Billingham and Hunt 2016; Frankenberg 2013). The findings from this study suggest that without
careful consideration of how education policies tap into racialized logics among parents, racial segregation and the colorblind ideologies associated with these patterns, will continue to persist through parental choice.
CHAPTER 3:

“SCHOOL IS SUPPOSE TO BE A PLACE OF LEARNING, NOT WHERE YOU FEEL UNSAFE”: BLACK MOTHERS’ SCHOOLING LOGICS

What are the schooling logics of middle class black homeschool and conventional school families? While a handful of studies consider the schooling choices of middle class black conventional schooling families (Allen 2012; Suizzo et al. 2008; Williams et al. 2017), or homeschooling families (Fields-Smith and Kisura 2013; Mazama and Lundy 2012), none have directly compared or contrasted these two distinct choices within one study. Yet the number of black homeschooling families has significantly grown over the past two decades. As of 2012, roughly 15% of the homeschool population are black families (260,100 to 351,900 students) (Fields-Smith and Kisura 2013). The rise in black homeschoolers and the increasing reports of racial discrimination in conventional schools, particularly of black boys, suggests these families may be bringing their children home to protect them from racism within conventional schools (Fields-Smith and Kisura 2013; Ferguson 2000; Huseman 2015; Mazama and Lundy 2012). Yet closer examination of the decision to remove black children from conventional schools is needed. Like with white homeschoolers, the choice to homeschool for black families signifies class resources that likely make the choice accessible to the middle class. Yet unlike the white homeschoolers who have been the primary focus of homeschool research (Collom 2005; Lois 2012; Stevens 2001), less attention has been paid to black homeschoolers, or how their choices compare to their conventionally schooling...
black counterparts (for important exceptions see Fields-Smith and Kisura 2013; Mazama and Lundy 2012).

The choice may demonstrate resistance towards the dominant white and middle class institution of schools. Yet because it’s a choice only accessible to the middle class, it may also involve drawing resources away from those less privileged black families who are left behind in conventional schools. Despite being fifty years past legal segregation, conventional schools remain highly segregated. Racial segregation and the economic inequalities that ensue, are linked to black students continued lag behind white students in terms of grades, testing, retention and college enrollment (Aud et al. 2010; Harris 2010); thus the choice to homeschool is likely linked to improving black children’s schooling opportunities by removing them from a school system that continues to disadvantage them. Yet how this choice compares to that of their black middle class conventionally schooling counterparts remains mostly unexamined, and is the focus of this chapter.

Literature Review

School Choice

An abundance of research examines families’ schooling choices. Across racial groups, parents’ schooling choices are influenced by where they live, transportation, childcare, employment, and opinions of family and friends. Yet consistently these “choices” most often preserve racial segregation (Billingham & Hunt 2016; Hagerman 2014; Lareau & Goyette 2014; Roda & Wells 2013). Schools composed
predominately of white students tend to have greater material resources and provide advantages to students that predominately black schools do not. This situates white students of all class backgrounds in schools that hold more material resources than their black counterparts of all class backgrounds, and maintains racial inequality in schooling (Billingham & Hunt 2016; Frankenberg 2013; Massey & Fischer 2006).

The scholarship examining black schooling choices tends to focus on working class and poor students and their families, and their strategies for navigating white spaces (Carter 2005; Cooper 2007; Lacy 2007; Lareau & Horvat 1999; Martin 2008; Moore 2005; Patillo 2015). For example, Carter (2005) finds low-income black students who are positioned as upwardly mobile learn to become “cultural straddlers.” These students move between the middle class white space of school and their black homes and communities by learning to express the differing cultural capital that is valued in each space. Yet, unexamined is how black middle class students and their families navigate schools and school choice.

Race and Class Inequalities

A second area of research focuses on the experiences of black middle class families, while mostly leaving out direct attention to their schooling choices. Much of this research examines these families’ economic and social patterns (Frazier 1957; Landry and Marsh 2011; Landry 1987; Pattillo-McCoy 2013; Pattillo 2005), as well as racial identity formation (Lacy 2007; Lacy 2004; Martin 2008; Moore 2005). Sparked in part by Wilson’s (1987) controversial research, arguing a declining significance of race, widespread debate persists regarding the influence of race and
social class in shaping the lives of middle class black families. Lacy’s (2004) research examines whether middle class black families assimilate into white spaces, despite the structural discrimination that persists. The study finds these families use “strategic assimilation” to navigate white middle class spaces, while seeking black middle class neighborhoods, or black social and religious organizations outside of their neighborhood for racial identity and solidarity. Some families live in predominately middle class black neighborhoods to buffer their children from racism, while others live in predominately middle class white neighborhoods to prepare their children for racism. In both cases, black parents seek to protect their children from racism, yet take different parenting approaches to achieve this goal.

Similarly, Moore’s (2005) research also examines black middle class families. Unlike Lacy who follows families residing in middle class neighborhoods, Moore studies middle class black families moving into a predominately low-income black neighborhood as part of a community development initiative. These families demonstrate secondary marginalization (Cohen 1999); as higher status community members, they use their cultural capital to improve the community yet do not fully disrupt all of the discriminatory assumptions attached to those who are more marginalized. Moore (2005) and others focus on the limits of racial solidarity building across class factions within black communities (Ginwright 2002; Martin 2008; Moore 2005).

**School Choice among Black Families**

If white and middle class values are embedded in dominant institutions, such as schools (Carter 2005; Cooper 2007; Ferguson 2001; Ginwright 2002; Lewis and
Diamond 2015; Massey and Fischer 2006), are schools a site of assimilation for black middle class students? What factors are these families considering when enrolling their children in school? Do they seek predominately black or predominately white schools? The few studies that do examine school choice among middle class blacks find these families are particularly aware of the role that race plays in their children’s schooling experiences (Suizzo et al. 2008; Williams et al. 2017). For example, Williams and colleagues’ (2017) find that black mothers of children entering kindergarten are particularly concerned with the racial composition of the school and the perspectives and practices of teachers. These mothers draw on close family relationships to compensate for the negative role race plays in their children’s schooling experience.

Other middle class blacks may seek alternative schooling approaches. For example, Ginwright (2002) studies a group of grassroots organizers seeking to transform a low-income predominately black school. The study finds major cleavages surface among organizers along class lines; middle class and working poor blacks differ in their vision for how to improve the school. While middle class organizers focus on cultural changes needed to improve the school, such as Afro-centric curricula, working class organizers focus on material needs, such as better textbooks and improved facilities. Thus, even in schools that are designed to center blackness, class factions may inhibit building a common vision, demonstrating the importance of class variation for influencing schooling choices of black families.

Homeschooling among Black Families
An additional alternate school form that a growing number of middle class black families choose involves removing their children from school entirely to homeschool. Yet the bulk of the research on homeschooling focuses on white families (Lois 2012; Stevens 2001), with a few exceptions (Fields-Smith and Kisura 2013; Levy 2009; Mazama and Lundy 2012). What we know from this research is that unlike their white counterparts, black families may be homeschooling to protect their children from racial discrimination within conventional schools. Yet left unexamined is how black homeschooling families navigate and understand their choice within their regional schooling context.

Like Lacy's (2004) research that finds middle class black families navigate white and black spaces to maintain racial identity and class privilege, do black homeschooling families seek black spaces to ensure racial identity and solidarity? Are black homeschoolers seeking white spaces other than schools to prepare their children for a white world? What we know about homeschooling is that these families most often rely on middle class resources to carry out the home education of their children. In addition, these families tend to be two-parent households that rely on mothers’ as home educators, while fathers provide for the family financially (Collom 2005; Fields-Smith & Kisura 2013; Lois 2012; Mazama & Lundy 2012; Stevens 2001). How do these families understand the decision to homeschool within the context of their black community, especially given that stay-at-home mothers have been relatively rare and even stigmatized (Barnes 2016)? This study seeks to contribute to this growing body of research by providing a comparison of school choice across middle class black homeschool and conventional schooling families. In
In this paper, I ask: (1) how do conventional school respondents understand their schooling choice and what factors shape their choice? (2) how do homeschool respondents understand their schooling choice and what factors shape their choice? (3) how do understandings of schooling choices compare across school type?

Methods

The 32 in-depth interviews drawn upon in this paper are part of a larger interview study. The larger study includes 95 interviews with a racially diverse sample of mothers, a set of whom homeschool, while another set send their children to conventional schools. I collected data for this larger project from January 2014 through October 2016. Like other studies of homeschooling families (Lois 2012; Stevens 2001), those who volunteered to be interviewed, and reported doing the work of homeschooling, were exclusively mothers, with the exception of one white homeschooling father.

The data I draw from in this chapter are from interviews with 32 black middle class mothers living in one metropolitan region in the Northeastern United States. Seventeen homeschool, while 15 conventionally school their children. The interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes, with an average of 60 minutes. I asked women questions about their experience and decisions around schooling their children. This included detailed questions about their family’s daily schedules, extra-curricular involvement, division of household labor, reasons for their schooling choice, supports around these decisions, social network activities, as well as mothering ideals. I also asked demographic questions about respondents’ paid employment history, partner status and employment history.
Like the recruitment strategies of prior homeschooling research with families in other regions of the United States (Fields-Smith & Kisura 2013; Lois 2012; Mazama & Lundy 2012; Stevens 2001), I recruited the homeschool respondents first, through contacting the eighteen homeschool organizations listed on the study region’s state-wide homeschooling website. These organizations were associated with the seven counties in and around the metropolitan region of interest. I emailed each of these organizations, asking organizers to send the study recruitment script to their email listserv. In addition, in the spring of 2014 and again in 2015, I attended an annual three-day regional homeschool conference, recruiting attendees in-between conference sessions. After each interview, I also asked respondents for contact information of homeschooling and conventionally schooling acquaintances in the region who might be interested in participating in the study. Since locating black homeschoolers in the region proved to be more challenging than locating whites, I also recruited black homeschoolers through national black homeschooling organizations, to locate those living within the study’s geographic region.

I interviewed respondents in the location of their choosing. This included cafés or parks that were located near respondents’ homes, in respondents’ homes or workplaces, while several respondents were interviewed via Skype or telephone. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and then coded and analyzed using the qualitative research software, NVivo 10. As Hesse-Biber (2006) suggests is common in interview studies, throughout the interviewing, transcribing, coding and analyzing process I took an iterative approach. After conducting interviews as well
as during transcription, I took field notes of themes surfacing from the interviews, and reflected on methodological tensions of positionality in relation to respondents. These notes initiated the coding process, which further developed into a coding scheme upon completing transcription. I drew from the practices of grounded theory to analyze data for emerging themes, while also making connections of prominent themes to the literature (Charmaz 2006).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.1</th>
<th>Homeschool (n=17)</th>
<th>Conventional (n=15)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Partner Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>94% (16)</td>
<td>60% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>6% (1)</td>
<td>40% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>88% (15)</td>
<td>87% (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular</td>
<td>12% (2)</td>
<td>13% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School/+</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>80% (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College/+</td>
<td>100% (17)</td>
<td>20% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No paid</td>
<td>47% (8)</td>
<td>27% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time paid</td>
<td>47% (8)</td>
<td>20% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time paid</td>
<td>6% (1)</td>
<td>53% (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Household Income</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under $30,000</td>
<td>6% (1)</td>
<td>13% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000 - $74,999</td>
<td>41% (7)</td>
<td>47% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$75,000 - $200,000</td>
<td>47% (8)</td>
<td>40% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above $200,000</td>
<td>6% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Class</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>18% (3)</td>
<td>60% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>76% (13)</td>
<td>40% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Middle Class</td>
<td>6% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3.1 Black Respondent Demographics*

**Characteristics of Sample**

As Table 3.1 shows, there is some variation across groups by marital status, education and employment. Compared to conventional schoolers, more homeschool
respondents are married, have higher levels of education, and fewer are in the paid labor market. All but one of the homeschool respondents are currently married or partnered, while this is the case for nine conventional schoolers. The remaining six conventional schoolers are in single-headed households. Of those married or partnered all respondents are in heterosexual relationships, except for one homeschool respondent who is in a lesbian relationship. Of the homeschool respondents, all hold at least a bachelor’s degree. There is more variation in education among the conventional school respondents; for twelve high school or some college is their highest level of schooling, while three have at least a bachelor’s degree. Variation in employment patterns are also notable between groups. Over half (n=8) of the conventional school respondents work full-time in the paid labor market, while just one homeschool respondent works full-time. Instead, close to half of the homeschoolers (n=8) and just three conventional schoolers hold part-time paid employment. Close to half of the homeschoolers (n=8) hold no paid employment positions, while this is the case for just four of the conventional schoolers.

Prior research with women show that gendered expectations around care makes household income a less precise indicator of social class than other measures, like education and occupation, since women’s incomes are often linked to marital status (Damaske 2011). Because of this, I measured social class by considering the education and occupation of each respondent and their partner, categorizing respondents as middle class when they hold at least a bachelor’s degree and their partners and/or themselves worked in jobs that demanded at least a college degree.
These jobs included teachers, lawyers, professors and small business owners.

Working-class parents were those who did not meet all middle class criteria, while upper middle class parents were those who meet the middle class criteria and also earned an annual household income above $200,000 per year (see Table 3.1).

Nineteen respondents (13 homeschool and 6 conventional school) were classified as middle class, one (homeschool) as upper-middle class, and twelve (three homeschool and nine conventional school) as working-class.

There are similarities across groups by religion and household income. Twenty-eight respondents identify as religious (15 homeschool and 13 conventional school). Four respondents are secular (two homeschool and two conventional school). Household incomes range across the four income brackets. Most respondents fall within the two middle brackets (15 homeschool and 13 conventional school), with only one homeschool respondent and no conventional school respondents meeting the highest income level. Three respondents, one homeschool and two conventional school, fall into the lowest income level, two of whom were conventional schoolers and headed single-parent households. The homeschool respondent is a married stay-at-home mother whose partner is in school full-time.

All 32 respondents identify as either black, Black American or African American. Respondents had anywhere from one to seven children who varied in age from infant to 18, but each respondent had at least one child between the ages of four and 18. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and personal details were withheld to ensure anonymity. In addition, given homeschool respondents concern
around anonymity as part of a relatively small network, specific regional details are withheld. Given that the average number of children in U.S. families is currently 2.4 (Pew Research Center 2014), in the Table 3.2 (below) I distinguish between those respondents with three or more children, and all those with fewer children to examine how number of children shapes school choice. In addition, because families may make a different schooling decision for high school years, I differentiate between those respondents with an oldest child in high school (at least 14 years) and those respondents whose oldest child has not yet reached high school age (under age 14).

Findings: School Choice Paths

When I asked respondents to explain why and how they made the schooling choices they did for their children, most emphasized prioritizing the school's quality. How they went about putting this school quality into place for their children involved a range of factors yet two major patterns emerge. A set of respondents follow what I refer to as a singular path: a decision that is primarily unchanging and that just over half of respondents engage (10 homeschool and 6 conventional school). These respondents decide on this schooling option before their children are of school age and intend to follow it through their children’s secondary school years.

A second set of respondents follow what I refer to as a phase path (7 homeschool and 9 conventional school): a set of choice patterns that involved navigating their school choice by intervening in the school on their child’s behalf before eventually removing them from that school. The sections to follow draws from the interview data to first demonstrate the singular path homeschool and then
conventional school respondents’ logics, before demonstrating the phase path of the homeschooler and conventional schoolers (see Table 3.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 3.2</th>
<th>SINGULAR Conventional</th>
<th>SINGULAR Homeschool</th>
<th>PHASE Conventional (n=9)</th>
<th>PHASE Homeschool (n=7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>33% (2)</td>
<td>100% (10)</td>
<td>78% (7)</td>
<td>86% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>67% (4)</td>
<td>100% (10)</td>
<td>100% (9)</td>
<td>71% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Degree / +</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>100% (10)</td>
<td>44% (4)</td>
<td>100% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 + Children</td>
<td>17% (1)</td>
<td>90% (9)</td>
<td>67% (6)</td>
<td>43% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oldest Child 14+</td>
<td>17% (1)</td>
<td>20% (2)</td>
<td>67% (6)</td>
<td>14% (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2 School Paths

The Singular Path of Conventional Schoolers

The set of conventional school respondents (n=6) following a singular schooling path explain choices that are shaped by financial constraint; most head single parent households (67%), all have less than a college degree, most work full-time (67%) and many have lower annual incomes than their homeschooling counterparts (see Table 3.2). Yet like their homeschooling counterparts, these respondents often explain schooling choices that are labor intensive. Caroline, a single mother of three, describes her choice this way:
There’s a lot of schools within walking distance of where I live, [but] he didn't get assigned within walking distance... Now he's in third grade in the same school that he's been in... I had an option to put him into [BUSING PROGRAM FOR MINORITY STUDENTS] but he’d already been in this school for four years. He knows everybody. Everybody knows him. He didn’t feel comfortable leaving... I thought about it, but I work full-time and the way it’s setup... my two older sons help me with my son... if I had moved him I would have to get [other] arrangements. It would be a really big hassle.

For Caroline making the schooling choices that she has for her sons has involved much thought. She has weighed the various options but ultimately decided to send them to the neighborhood school to which they have been assigned. Her decision is shaped by her work schedule that constrains her ability to transport her kids to and from school; as the head of household, her family is reliant upon her salary to make ends meet. Even though she has the option to send her son to a more highly ranked school that provides transportation, because she relies on her older sons to get her youngest son to and from school, arranging to have him be bussed out of the district makes transferring him to this new school less plausible. In addition, her son does not want to transfer schools because he already has a network of friends in his current school. While she does weigh the various options, Caroline ultimately settles on keeping her son in this particular conventional school.

Like Caroline, Lulu, a single mother who works full time in the service sector, has sent her daughter to the neighborhood school from kindergarten through her current eighth grade. She explains her schooling choice this way:

[In elementary school] I felt like I spent more time at the school directing her... She did have a boy bullying her at one point... my daughter hit him, because he wouldn’t leave her alone... [After] talking to the principal he would say "we have an anti-bullying policy and we don't allow that [hitting]... "

61
While Lulu has kept her daughter in the neighborhood conventional schools through elementary and middle school, she has been deeply involved in the process. She intervened in the school when another student was bullying her daughter, meeting with the principal to advocate on her daughter’s behalf. She also explained her negotiation with the school to ensure her daughter receive extra support in math:

She struggles in math so . . . we were coming home every day and sitting for hours to understand her math homework . . . she had to start being at school at 7:30 in the morning, in fourth grade to get the extra help that she needed . . . I made her go to summer school this past summer so she can do better in math.

Lulu ended up sending her daughter to school early in fourth grade for math tutoring, and more recently sent her to summer school to get the support she needed. As a single parent, Lulu works full-time to support herself and her daughter, which means the schooling options available to her are more limited. Despite this, Lulu remains deeply involved in her daughter’s progress through the conventional school.

Marion, a single mother of one, has also kept her daughter in their local conventional school, despite not being satisfied. She explains:

The [public] school is terrible. They don't do for the kids what other districts would do. She can’t do the homework because either she doesn’t understand it or she doesn’t know how to do it and they’re not helping her with it. It’s basically like I’m teaching her at home . . . If I have to teach her all of the subjects that they are teaching her then I’m doing their job . . .

Like Caroline, Marion has spent much time navigating school choice for her daughter. Yet her low-income as a single mother has made moving schools or homeschooling less plausible. She has worked to mitigate the lack of support her
daughter has received from the school by intervening on her behalf; she has met
with teachers and the school's principal to advocate for her daughters learning
needs. She also explains the school's lack of response to the bullying her daughter
casted:

   My daughter has been bullied since kindergarten right up until now. They
don't want to do anything about it. I've been to the school so many
times for meetings; they turn it around and make it look like my daughter is
the one who is making the trouble.

Despite the work Marion has done, going into the school time and time again
to advocate for her social and educational support and protection, Marion remains
discouraged by the lack of effective improvement in her daughter’s schooling
experience. The school continues to fail to effectively address the educational or
social needs, leaving her to do much educating of her daughter at home.

   Ironically, despite all of the financial constraints Marion faces, she intends to
pull her daughter from the conventional school the following year due to the
continued negative interactions she and her daughter face at the school. She has
found a free online homeschool program that will allow her daughter to follow daily
lessons. Marion imagines her role in her daughter’s education will be similar,
helping her with homework and lessons, yet it will come without the racial
discrimination she has experienced from the school. Compared to other
respondents, Marion's story is unusual in that despite her low economic means she
plans to disrupt her singular path school choice to homeschool.

   Marion's explanation suggests there may be a tipping point; while for those
with more material resources at their disposal changing schools to accommodate a
child’s academic or social needs may have a lower threshold, yet even for those with
fewer material resources, if the situation is dire enough respondents may find a way to transfer schools despite their low material resources.

The Singular Path of Homeschoolers

The set of homeschoolers (n=10) following a singular schooling path chose not to put their child in conventional school at all and instead homeschool their children. Unlike the singular path conventional schoolers, most of these respondents explain their decision to homeschool as based on their religious beliefs, while drawing from the material resources available to them. For example, Jazmine, a black upper middle class mother of two young children, describes her religiously motivated reasons for homeschooling:

Here they tell your kids crazy stuff at school. . . . [like a] story was about my mommies . . . I know it’s out there but I would like to introduce my kids to it at my own pace . . . so it just seemed like if I put our kid in school after they came home from school I would have to figure what did they teach you that was crazy and then unteach that . . . it just kind of seemed like too much work.

Jazmine is especially concerned with the curriculum of conventional schools for disrupting the heteronormative values of her Christian family. She links her concern as in part about moving to the northeast, where conventional schools embrace values that go against her Christian beliefs. Instead of always needing to “unteach” these secular values from her children’s school experience, she and her husband decide to homeschool. Underlying their decision is the material resources that make the decision possible. Jazmine is highly educated, holding a graduate degree, which likely contributes to her confidence in educating her children effectively at home. In addition, even after giving up her professional career to be a
full time homeschooling mother, her husband’s salary alone puts her family in the highest earning bracket.

Patricia provides a similar explanation for her family’s schooling choice:

From the minute we had children we spoke about homeschooling them. . . My husband doesn't see the point in paying a lot of money to [attend] a private Christian school . . . and I'm very opposed to public schools because . . . there are ideas and themes that become a part of the students' normal thinking, no matter how hard the parent may try to keep them on the straight and narrow . . . I believe the public school agenda is to minimize that and help create tolerance all across the board and not see any actions as wrong or right.

Like Jazmine, Patricia expresses a similar faith based sentiment for homeschooling her children from the time they are school age. Especially because she has seven children, Patricia explains sending her children to a Christian school is less financially feasible. In addition, Patricia’s middle class location makes homeschooling plausible; both Patricia and her husband have graduate degrees and professional careers. Her husband works full-time as a teacher while she is able to maintain her practice as a physician by working part-time from home while also homeschooling.

Jamie, a college educated homeschooling mother with three children, also explains her schooling choice as one motivated by religion while reliant upon her middle class location:

I thought I might send them to a Catholic school but I wasn't really happy with what I saw . . . I knew a lot of the kids’ families and to see the way that they acted in school and the way that they acted at home . . . if they were home they were more formed not from their peers . . . Education is important to me but my number one is that I make disciplines of them. I want them to be in the purpose that God has for them. To know that life is not all about them. It’s about God and what He wants them to do with their lives. And I don’t see a better way to do that than to be able to be with them all the time through school.
Before becoming a mother, Jamie worked full-time in higher education after earning her Bachelor’s degree. While Jamie and her husband did consider sending their three daughters to Catholic school, it was the negative influence of peers and the importance she places on making her children disciples that led her to ultimately decide to keep them home. She describes homeschooling as the best way to instill religious teachings into her children, while also avoiding the negative peer pressure she sees surfacing in conventional schools. The family relies on her husband’s full-time job in the tech industry to support her as a stay-at-home homeschooling mother.

Unlike the singular path conventional schoolers, the singular path homeschoolers have the class resources—two-parent households, college and advanced degrees—to support their choice. By relying on these resources, and motivated by their religious beliefs, families like Jazmine, Patricia and Jamie, are able to make the choice to homeschool. These families look very similar to the homeschool families of prior research in following a singular path and in making the choice to homeschool for religious reasons (Collom 2005; Lois 2012; NCES 2015; Stevens 2001). In a survey that included nearly 400 homeschooling students, the National Center for Education Statistics (2015) finds that just one third of homeschoolers list religion as the primary reason for homeschooling, yet over two thirds of these families list religion as one of the motivating factors. In addition, while this and other prior studies have focused primarily on white homeschoolers (Collom 2005; Lois 2012; NCES 2015; Stevens 2001), the few exceptions suggest religion may also be a major part of the reason black families homeschool (Fields-
Smith and Kisura 2013; Mazama and Lundy 2012). Given the relative isolation these families may experience black churches may play an especially important role in the social lives of black homeschoolers.

The Phase Path of Conventional Schoolers

The second schooling path is engaged by just under half of respondents (n=16). These respondents follow what I refer to as a phase path, in which they (1) enroll their child in a conventional school, (2) intervene in the school on their child's behalf, (3) remove their child from that school often after a negative interaction, and then (4) transfer their child to a new school. As shown in Table 3.2, all of these respondents (7 homeschool and 9 conventional school) explain their school choice as following these same four steps. They navigate their school choice by intervening in the school on their child’s behalf before eventually removing them from the school to transfer them to a different school. While in some ways these families look very similar, the difference in their final school decision—conventional school or homeschool—is based in part on their social networks as well as their particular family and school context. The phase path conventional schoolers see viable non-homeschool alternatives to the school they are leaving (see Table 3.2).

Phase path conventional schoolers explain intervening in the school to improve their child’s experience. For example, Dejah, a mother of three who works full-time as does her husband, describes intervening in the school on her daughter’s behalf in response to an altercation her daughter had with another student:

[My daughter] never had a fight in school until this time. A girl said . . . something negative about my daughter . . . My daughter lunged past the teacher to get to the girl . . . because [my daughter] is taller girl, and she
didn’t look like any of the other girls in her accelerated class what-so-ever; she is the only black girl . . . all the other ones are Caucasian . . . that’s when the principal told me that the teacher does not feel safe around her; this is a white teacher. I said “what do you mean, [not] feel safe . . . if I have to go over your heads I will.”

Dejah explains her decision to move schools as a response to the racial discrimination her daughter experienced in the accelerated classes at her school; she is singled out as the only black girl and framed as threatening by the white teacher. Despite Dejah’s intervention in the school on her daughter’s behalf, she is unsatisfied with the school’s response and thus decides to transfer her to a different conventional school in the region.

Like Dejah, Amelia decided to transfer her children to a different school after being dissatisfied with the teachers’ treatment. Amelia is a mother of three. She holds an advanced degree and works part time, while her husband, who also holds an advanced degree, works full-time to support the family. Amelia describes her schooling choices this way:

I wasn’t happy with the [private school] teachers, the way they treated the students. If I was paying money they should have some respect. That’s why we pulled them out . . . public schools [are] just as good so we ended up pulling them out, figuring it [would] be cost-effective . . . [Private school teachers] were . . . very rude and was yelling at my son for no reason . . . [My children] slowly adjusted into the [public] school . . . I’ve gone to all the parent-teacher meetings. The teachers are involved . . . they know the parent is involved, then they will go out of their way to help the students . . .

For Amelia, it is partly because she was unsatisfied and paying for her children to attend the private school, as opposed to unsatisfied but not paying, that pushed her to transfer her children to the public school. She describes the teachers at the public school as better. As long as she demonstrates her involvement in the school, teachers are responsive to her children’s learning needs. Amelia’s story
demonstrates the extensive work these parents’ engage to make the decision to transfer schools; even once she transferred schools, Amelia stays actively involved in the school to ensure her children receive the quality education she seeks.

Emory holds a bachelor’s degree. She and her husband work full-time to support their teenage daughter. Like Amelia, Emory also decided to transfer schools. Her daughter was enrolled in the neighborhood public school but after intervening on her daughter’s behalf when the school was not accommodating her academic needs, Emory made the decision to try one of the new charter schools in the region instead:

My experience going to [neighborhood] schools. . . . it's a harder journey. Is that good [that my daughter is] working those extra hours now [at the charter]? Being a smaller school, I can still call and speak to a staff member or principle and because it’s a new school hopefully their ears are open . . . they are trying to get this all right . . .

Based on her own and her daughter’s experience in the local public schools, Emory concludes that they make for a “harder journey.” This was especially apparent to her when she transitioned into college. Given her college plans for her daughter, she decides to try her daughter in one of the charter schools in the region instead. She likes the small size, and the responsiveness of teachers, although she is uncertain of the longer hours the school requires of her daughter. Her daughter is in school until four thirty each day and also attends a half day on Saturdays. Despite these concerns, she is hopeful that the rigor will pay off for her daughter, particularly when it comes to making the transition from high school to college.

The Phase Path of Homeschoolers
Seven homeschool respondents follow a phase path in their schooling choices. In some ways the phase path homeschoolers’ logic looks similar to the phase path conventional schoolers; they start out in conventional school, intervene in the school on their child’s behalf, most often after their child experiences racial discrimination from the school administration. They then decide to remove their child, after being dissatisfied with the school’s response, or lack thereof. Yet these families end up homeschooling instead of enrolling their children in a different conventional school. Why? The difference between them, and their conventionally schooling counterparts is primarily seen through their social networks and/or a lack of viable conventional school alternatives. When facing the decision of which school to transfer their child to, homeschool respondents explain that knowing a homeschooling family helped to make this option seem viable.

For example, Lonnette is a mother of two, who holds a bachelor’s degree and works part-time, while her partner works full-time. She explains pulling her son from the public school to homeschool after a negative interaction with his teacher:

I put him in public school, ‘cause that was what was closest to us... [but] he was having a hard time with some of the teachers... he’s seven but he looks like he’s ten and they [teachers] acted like they were afraid of him. He’s never acted out violently but they made it sound like he was going to... I just didn't want to have to keep going to the principal’s office... I'm like "you’re really targeting my kid for no reason because he’s the second biggest kid in the school." [My son] begged me to pull him out and I did.

Lonnette comes to the decision to homeschool after being fed up with the teacher’s discriminatory treatment of her son. She describes the teacher profiling him as “violent” and as being “afraid of him” despite the fact that he had never actually acted violently in school. After spending much time intervening in the
school on her son’s behalf—talking to the principle and teachers about various situations—she decides to homeschool. She explains her decision: “I had known of a homeschooling family in Vermont. That’s how I heard that it existed and that it was legal.” Lonnette explains that it is through her social networks—knowing a homeschooling family in Vermont—that homeschooling occurred to her as a possibility when her son was facing such challenges in the conventional school.

The strain homeschooling puts on her family makes it clear why she may not have considered the option until her son’s situation became unbearable. Lonnette and her husband juggle their work schedules so that he cares for the kids while she is at work, and she provides the education and care for them the rest of the time. This means Lonnette and her husband rarely spend time together as a family. She draws on the virtual support of other homeschoolers in the region as well as her father—a retired public school teacher—for pedagogical support.

The treatment of Lonnette’s son within the conventional school parallels Ferguson’s (2000) research examining the schooling experiences of black boys. Ferguson finds that the social and structural processes of conventional schools, pigeon hole these students as “bad boys”: aggressive, violent and threatening. Through the schools’ disciplinary and tracking system, black boys are framed as troublemakers. Similarly, many of the mothers in this study explain situations in which their black child experience school administrations interpreting their child’s behavior as aggressive. These phase path homeschoolers draw on their material resources, as well as social networks, to protect their children from this discriminatory treatment by removing their child from the conventional school
altogether to homeschool. Those with fewer resources are left to resist the discriminatory treatment of their child by intervening on their behalf, meeting with the school administration or transferring to a different conventional school.

Like Lonnette, Sharon also intervened and then removed her son from the conventional school to homeschool after a negative experience there. Despite working full-time as a professor, she has a flexible schedule that allows her to home educate, while her husband’s teacher schedule and her extended kin fill in with childcare on the days she needs to be in the office. Sharon explains the situation that led to her decision to homeschool her six-year-old son:

My son had a bad experience; once he brought in a match from my matches at home. He was saying "I wanted to bring in my match because I wanted to show my class mates and talk to them about it." He was suspended. They had him in the principal's office. He was crying . . . they ostracized him. This is a good little boy. They made me feel like he was a terrorist and so after that experience . . . he said "I don’t want to go to school next year mom" and I said "okay."

Despite having mostly positive interactions with the teachers and principal until that point, Sharon ended up homeschooling after her son was suspended for bringing a match to his first-grade show and tell. She was disappointed with their treatment of him, making him feel like a “terrorist”; after her son asked to stay home, she realized it would be possible to homeschool given her flexible work schedule and the childcare support that her husband and extended kin could provide. This reflects Dow’s (2015) research with conventionally schooling middle class black families. She finds that despite the resources available to these families to purchase child care through centers, middle class black mothers seek the support of extended kin in part due to concern of racial bias in child care centers. In a similar
way, Sharon and other homeschool respondents seek the support of extended kin for child care.

In addition, it was the close relationships Sharon had growing up with children who were homeschooled, that led her to view homeschooling as a viable option:

I grew up around a lot of homeschoolers... my friend and her five siblings homeschooled. They always had fun and I always was kind of envious of them... people talked ill of them... but as adults they're very articulate... they assimilate very well... and they're free thinkers because of them being homeschooled.

At a moment when Sharon needed to find an alternative to the conventional school her son had been attending, she draws on the positive impression she held of her childhood friends who homeschooled. They serve as a resource to inform her decision to choose homeschooling for her son.

Similarly, Juanita, a college-educated single mother with two daughters, also decided to remove her daughters from the public school to homeschool after her older daughter's negative encounter in the conventional school:

When she moved to the school she was doing well.... I remember the teachers saying that she was at the top of her class... [But] there was an issue where she was assaulted by a student... I got a lawyer because they weren't handling and it kept being an issue... they weren't keeping the [student] away from her... things just continued to get worse... it was to the point that I was so nervous about my kid being in school... I just had to take her out.

Despite Juanita's multiple interventions in the school on her daughter's behalf, the school administration did not effectively handle the student who assaulted her daughter. The school failed to punish the harasser or to keep him away from her. This led Juanita to fear for her daughter's safety, and despite the
financial hardship she faced as a single mother, she decided she needed to remove her daughters from the school. She first sent them to a Christian school, but because of the cost and distance—the school was a thirty-minute drive from their home and there was no public transportation—Juanita eventually decided to homeschool both of her daughters. As she told me, she had “most definitely heard” about homeschooling and knew people who did it. Yet she had never seriously considered it for her family. But when the public school was unresponsive and the religious school became too expensive, she decided homeschooling was the best option. Unlike other respondents who had two-parent households to support the decision to homeschool, for Juanita, and perhaps other single-parent households like Marion, the single path conventional schooler from above, there may be a tipping point for these families; if the situation becomes too concerning and other alternatives are impractical, the family may resort to homeschooling, despite the strain and unfamiliarity.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study makes important theoretical contributions to race and education scholarship by demonstrating the ways that status influences how individuals’ navigate opportunity structures. Like Dow’s (2015) research with black middle class families and their navigation of child care, I find respondents use similar choice logics when it comes to schooling; while Dow (2015) finds mothers seek child care from extended kin to avoid racial discrimination from child care centers, despite being able to afford the cost of child care centers, my study shows respondents
avoid racial discrimination in schools by transferring out of these schools, and in the

case of homeschoolers, relying on the nuclear family to homeschool.

Unlike the singular path respondents who choose to homeschool primarily
for religious reasons, the phase path homeschoolers look more like their middle-
class conventionally schooling counterparts. They would have remained in the
conventional school system, yet report racial discrimination leads these families to
remove their children from these schools. These findings reflect Ferguson’s research
(2001) examining black boys’ discriminatory experiences within conventional
schools where they are framed as aggressive and violent. Yet these respondents
describe not just black boys, but also black girls being framed by schools as
threatening.

The phase homeschool respondents’ logics aligns with research on black
homeschooling families in the mid-Atlantic and southern United States that finds
these families choose to homeschool to protect their children from racism within
schools (Fields-Smith and Kisura 2013; Mazama and Lundy 2012). Yet, previous
research does not provide direct comparisons to similarly located conventionally
schooling families living in the same region. By drawing on the social networks of
these black homeschooling families, this study examines the reasons why families
who facing similar schooling options within one northeastern metropolitan region,
decide to homeschool as opposed to send their child to conventional school.

In sum, across homeschool and conventional school respondents,
explanations for why and how they made the schooling choices they did for their
children demonstrates respondents are deeply invested in their children’s
education, and particularly aware of the racial discrimination embedded in schools. They are also very aware of the future repercussions if they fail to ensure a successful schooling experience for their children. How respondents go about putting this quality schooling into place is shaped by their class resources and social networks. School choice encourage parents to choose the best schooling option for their child, yet leaves these mostly middle class black families to deal with racial discrimination from conventional schools on their own. If schools do not address the discrimination, parents end up taking it upon themselves to find a less discriminatory schooling option for their child. For those who know homeschoolers, this may lead to homeschooling, while others transfer to a different school with the hope that they will face less racial discrimination.

In either case, the responsibility of dealing with systematic discrimination ends up falling on the backs of individual families, but particularly mothers who appear to do the majority of this supplemental schooling work. Yet the phase path schooling, and singular path homeschooling is unequally accessible, leaving those most marginalized to deal with the racial discrimination within “failing” conventional schools on their own. These findings highlight the unequal access of schooling “choices” in the lives of black families, and how crucial homeschooling is as one of the less accessible, options. By comparing homeschoolers to their conventionally schooling counterparts, this study shows the way that schooling logics, while similar, are significantly shaped by class resources and social networks.
CHAPTER 4

“I DON’T TALK TO ANYONE”: HOMESCHOOL MOTHERS’ FAMILIAL SUPPORTS

How does race condition the use of supports among homeschooling families? Based on interview accounts with white and black middle-class homeschooling mothers, this chapter examines the supports these families use to increase the rewards and diminish the costs of homeschooling. Many of those in their social networks—extended kin, churches, and neighbors—are skeptical of homeschooling. But that skepticism, and the variation in support it produces, is organized around race. Existing scholarship shows that race shapes the use of supports among non-homeschooling middle-class families. For example, whites and blacks both rely on the nuclear family—mother, father and children—(Barnes 2016; Stone 2008), yet, in the case of childcare, whites often seek paid care, while blacks seek such care from extended kin (Cooper 2009; Dow 2016a, 2016b; Gerstel 2011; Uttal 1999). By examining the rewards and challenges that white and black mothers’ associate with homeschooling, this study contributes to family scholarship by attending to the diversity of support that these mothers obtain.

Recent news and research suggests there are a growing number of families who homeschool in the United States (Collom 2005; Fields-Smith & Kisura 2013; Huseman 2015; Levy 2009; Lois 2013; Mazama & Lundy 2012; NCES 2016c; Rich 2015). Indeed, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2016 roughly 3.3 percent of the school age population were estimated to be homeschooling in the United States; this is up from 1.7 percent of the population in
1999 (NCES 2016c). To put this in context, this compares to the much more highly researched 5% of the school age population reported to be attending charter schools, or 9% attending private schools (NCES 2016a).

Studies of homeschoolers have primarily focused on why families choose to homeschool (Collom 2005; Fields-Smith & Kisura 2013; Mazama & Lundy 2012; Stevens 2001). These studies show families often homeschool due to concern about school environment (i.e. child safety, negative peer pressures), and schools’ inability to cater to individual learning needs (Collom 2005). The majority homeschool for secular reasons (Collom 2005; Stevens 2001; NCES 2016c).

Prior research also provides important demographic information about homeschoolers, suggesting they are primarily middle-class, two-parent, and rely on mothers’ as home educators, while fathers provide for the family financially (Collom 2005; Fields-Smith & Kisura 2013; Lois 2013; Mazama & Lundy 2012; Stevens 2001). In addition, besides growing in popularity, there are an increasing number of families of color choosing this option. In 2016 families of color made up 41% of the homeschool population, while 59% were non-Hispanic white, and this is up from 25% families of color and 75% non-Hispanic white in 1999 (NCES 2016c). Yet research comparing how homeschooling is experienced across race is missing.

This study addresses this gap by examining the accounts of rewards, challenges, and supports that 38 white and black middle-class homeschooling mothers report. Across race, respondents’ express similar homeschool rewards and challenges. Yet their strategies for navigating these challenges vary. Access to homeschool support—regional information, teaching resources, and emotional
support—is unequal; white homeschoolers find their primary support through networks of other white homeschooling mothers in the region. Black homeschoolers find some support from these white networks, yet most also seek the support of extended kin, particularly their own parents. Black mothers’ relative isolation from other homeschoolers uncovers their unequal access to the homeschooling community, and the continuing importance of kin for these mothers. In contrast, white mothers’ reliance on other homeschoolers also uncovers the lack of support they receive from kin, suggesting ways that homeschooling distances these mothers from extended family.

Families across Race and Social Class

While class advantaged families are far from homogenous, shaped by economic and racial inequalities, there are some consistent trends. Scholars have shown how mothering, for example, is shaped by cultural schemas of what it means to be a “good” mother, often examined through the relationship between employment and mothering (Blair-Loy 2003; Christopher 2012; Damaske 2011; Hays 1996; Uttal 1999). Hays (1996) defined this pervasive cultural scheme as “intensive mothering,” arguing that women face a cultural contradiction between employment—in which workers are expected to prioritize work over family—and family, which urges women to give unselfishly of her time and resources to children.

Sociologists document the ubiquity of intensive mothering as seen through women experiencing conflict when combining employment with mothering (Barnes 2016; Blair-Loy 2003; Christopher 2012; Dow 2016a; Dean, Marsh, & Landry 2013; Hays 1996; Stone 2008; Tichenor et. al. 2016). Other scholars argue that despite the
ubiquity of the work-family tension narrative, mothers resist this cultural narrative in various ways. For example, Damaske (2011) finds women conceptualize their relationship to family and work as “for the family.” These race and class diverse women dissipate the tension between work and family through reinforcing gendered expectations that women’s primary motivation, including employment participation, are for her children and husband. While Villabos’ study (2014) with women of young children, finds that some mothers seek an intensive mothering connection with children to make up for other realms of their life that may be insecure. These mothers invest in their mother-child relationship not “for the family” but as a benefit to themselves.

Other scholars highlight how these cultural schemas of mothering rely on race, class and gender inequalities, making “good mothering” a white middle-class model against which all other forms are measured (Collins 2000:77; Collins 1994; Elliott, Powell and Brenton 2015). A growing body of research specifically examines middle-class black families (Barnes 2016; Dow 2016a; Lacy 2007; Landry & Marsh 2011; Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Williams et al. 2017). These families also navigate mothering expectations, yet one that does not place family and work responsibilities in conflict. For example, Dow (2016a) finds a sample of class advantaged black mothers engage an “integrated mothering” ideology, which assumes they are financially self-reliant, work outside of the home, and rely on extended kin for childrearing support. Similarly, Barnes’ (2016) study with black professional women finds they engage a “strategic mothering” approach that privileges marital stability over work stability, focusing on the nuclear family as a survival strategy for
themselves and their black communities. These alternative ideologies reflect historical underpinnings through which black women’s focus on self-reliance, while extended kin support remains crucial for navigating structural inequalities that shape their lives (Collins 2000).

Along with facing differing cultural ideals and structural arrangements, white and black middle-class families often seek different supports. Scholars have documented how relying primarily on the nuclear family is more specific to how white, middle-class individuals “do” family (Collins 1994; Gerstel 2011; Uttal 1999). In contrast, families of color, immigrant families, and lower-income families rely on supports from extended kin, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and cousins, as well as fictive kin, or those who are not related by blood (Collins 1994; Dow 2016a, 2016b; Gerstel 2011; Sarkisian & Gerstel 2004; Taylor et al 2015; Uttal 1999). For low-income black mothers these supports may be crucial for family survival (Collins 1994). Yet even black middle-class mothers often rely on extended kin for childcare, despite their relative financial security (Dow 2016a, 2016b; Uttal 1999). This contrasts with their white counterparts who tend to outsource childcare to paid providers. These mothers explain the choice as a tactic for avoiding racial discrimination and cultivating strong relationships between their children and extended kin (Dow 2016b). Together these studies show that white and black middle-class families, despite their similar socioeconomic locations, may negotiate family differently.

Families and Schooling Choices

81
Parents’ decisions and experiences with schooling their children show family circumstances are influential. Much research has examined the decisions class advantaged white families make around schooling their children. Parents are influenced by housing, transportation, childcare, employment, and opinions of family members and friends, while these choices often preserve racial segregation (Billingham & Hunt 2016; Lareau & Goyette 2014; Roda & Wells 2013). Schools composed predominately of white students tend to have greater material resources and provide advantages to students that predominately black schools do not. This situates white students in schools that hold more material resources than their black class advantaged counterpart, reproducing racial inequalities (Billingham & Hunt 2016). Recent studies also suggest some white families choose to send their children to more integrated schools, yet within integrated schools segregation and these patterns of inequality persist (Lewis & Diamond 2015).

Less research has focused on the schooling experiences of black class advantaged families (Cooper 2009; Lacy 2007; Lareau & Horvat 1999). A few important exceptions show these families are particularly aware of the role that race plays in their children’s schooling experiences (Suizzo et al. 2008; Williams et al. 2017). They may strategically incorporate integration and segregation into their children’s experiences (Lacy 2007). These families may also pay particular attention to their children’s schools’ racial composition and pedagogy, drawing on close family relationships to compensate for the negative role race plays in their children’s schooling experience (Williams et al. 2017).
Across race, non-homeschooling families often rely on the active involvement of the nuclear family to support their schooling decisions. Left mostly unexamined, however, is whether the role of family is different among the growing number of white and black homeschooling families. This is a serious omission given the general consensus that homeschoolers rely so much on family—especially on the unpaid work of mothers (Lois 2013). The decision to homeschool may also have very different meanings in the black community—where stay-at-home mothers have been relatively rare and even stigmatized (Barnes 2016)—compared to their white counterparts. While race remains undertheorized in studies of white homeschoolers, a few recent studies with black families suggest they choose to homeschool to protect children from racial discrimination in schools (Fields-Smith & Kisura 2013; Mazama & Lundy 2012). Yet left unexamined is a direct comparison of white and black homeschoolers’ motivations, experiences, or supports. This study builds on the growing body of research by providing a cross racial comparison of the role of family among homeschoolers. My research considers: (1) what white and black respondents’ view as the rewards of homeschooling, (2) what they view as the challenges of homeschooling, and (3) what supports they seek and receive for homeschooling.

Methods

The 38 in-depth interviews drawn upon in this paper are part of a larger interview study. The larger study includes 95 white and black mothers, a set of whom homeschool, while a second set sent their children to conventional schools. I collected data for this larger project from January 2014 through October 2016. Like
other studies of homeschooling families (Lois 2013; Stevens 2001), those who volunteered to be interviewed, and reported doing the work of homeschooling, were exclusively mothers, with the exception of one white homeschooling father.

The data I draw on in this paper come from interviews with 21 white mothers and 17 black mothers who homeschool their children. The interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes, with an average of 60 minutes. I asked women questions about their experience homeschooling their children. This included detailed questions about their family’s daily schedules, extra-curricular involvement, division of household labor, reasons for homeschooling, homeschool supports, influences of social networks, as well as mothering ideals. I also asked demographic questions about respondents’ paid employment history, partner status and employment history.

Like the recruitment strategies of prior homeschooling research with families in other regions (Fields-Smith & Kisura 2013; Lois 2013; Mazama & Lundy 2012; Stevens 2001), I recruited respondents through contacting the eighteen homeschool organizations listed on the study region’s state-wide homeschooling website. These organizations were associated with the seven counties in and around the metropolitan region of interest. I emailed each of these organizations, asking organizers to send the study recruitment script to their email listserv. In addition, in the spring of 2014 and again in 2015, I attended an annual three-day regional homeschool conference, recruiting attendees in-between conference sessions. After each interview, I also asked respondents for contact information of homeschooling acquaintances in the region who might be interested in participating in the study.
To make the racial comparison between white and black homeschoolers empirically meaningful, I over sampled for black homeschooling families to include roughly equal numbers of white and black respondents. Locating black homeschoolers in the region proved to be more challenging than locating whites. Thus, along with the above recruitment strategies, I also recruited black homeschoolers through national black homeschooling organizations, to locate those living within the study's geographic region.

I interviewed respondents in the location of their choosing. For 20 respondents this was a café or park that was located near their home, while nine other respondents invited me to conduct interviews in their home. In the case of two mothers, I conducted interviews in their workplace, while seven respondents were interviewed via Skype and telephone. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and then coded and analyzed using the qualitative research software, NVivo 10. As Hesse-Biber (2006) suggests is common in interview studies, throughout the interviewing, transcribing, coding and analyzing process I took an iterative approach. After conducting interviews as well as during transcription, I took field notes of themes surfacing from the interviews, and reflected on methodological tensions of positionality in relation to respondents. These notes initiated the coding process, which further developed into a coding scheme upon completing transcription. I drew from the practices of grounded theory to analyze data for emerging themes, while also making connections of prominent themes to the literature (Charmaz 2006).

Characteristics of Sample
Thirty-four respondents were married in heterosexual relationships, while one black respondent was in a lesbian relationship. Three respondents were in single-headed households: one white and one black woman were widowed, and another white woman had never been married. Prior research with women show that gendered expectations around care makes household income a less precise indicator of social class than other measures, like education and occupation, since women’s incomes are often linked to marital status (Damaske 2011). Following from this research, I measured social class by considering the education and occupation of each respondent and their partner, categorizing respondents as middle-class when they hold at least a bachelor’s degree and their partners and/or themselves worked in jobs that demanded at least a college degree. These jobs included teachers, lawyers, professors and small business owners. Working-class parents were those who did not meet all of the middle-class criteria from above, while upper-middle class parents were those who meet the middle-class criteria and also earned an annual household income above $200,000 per year (see Table 4.1). Twenty-nine respondents (15 white and 13 black) were classified as middle-class, three (two white and one black) as upper-middle class, and six (four white and two black) as working-class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.1</th>
<th>White Homeschool (n=21)</th>
<th>Black Homeschool (n=17)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>90% (19)</td>
<td>94% (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>10% (2)</td>
<td>6% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>67% (14)</td>
<td>88% (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular</td>
<td>33% (7)</td>
<td>12% (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.1 Homeschool Demographics

As Table 4.1 shows, across race families look similar by marital status, religious affiliation, education, and employment. All but two white and one black respondent were married, 26 were religious (14 white and 12 black). Among black respondents there were three non-Christian religious families (one Jewish and two Muslim). Nine respondents were secular (seven whites and two blacks). Across race respondents were highly educated; all respondents held at least a bachelor’s degree while 13 also held a graduate degree (seven whites and six blacks). Eighteen respondents (ten whites and eight blacks) were not employed outside of the home at all, while 17 (nine whites and eight blacks) were employed in various part-time work.

Household incomes ranged across the four income brackets. The majority of respondents fell within the two middle brackets (16 whites and 15 blacks), with only two whites and one black meeting the highest income level. Three of the four
respondents falling into the lowest income level were in single-parent households. Despite the variation in income, when considered along with education and occupation, most respondents were middle-class (see Table 4.1). All 21 white respondents identified as white or Caucasian. All 17 black respondents identified as either black, Black American or African American. Respondents had anywhere from one to seven children who varied in age from infant to 18, but each respondent had at least one child between the ages of four and 18.

As Table 4.1 shows, three mothers worked full-time. Two of these women (Gail, white working-class, and Sharon, black middle-class) relied on their extended kin and husbands for childcare, along with a flexible work schedule to manage homeschooling. The third respondent, Joy, entered the paid labor force full-time after the loss of her husband. At the time of the interview she was not receiving homeschool support from extended kin or other homeschoolers. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and personal details were withheld in some cases to ensure anonymity. In addition, given homeschool respondents’ concern around anonymity as part of a relatively small network of homeschoolers, specific regional details are withheld.

Findings

In this study, mothers are primarily the ones doing the work of homeschooling. This reflects similar findings from studies with white homeschoolers in other regions of the United States (Lois 2013; Stevens 2001) and is consistent with non-homeschooling research demonstrating that on average women continue to engage in more direct childcare, despite their increased labor
participation (Blair-Loy 2003; Damaske 2011; Hochschild 1996). Therefore, these findings are reflective of the persistence of this gendered dynamic, and the significance of homeschooling for fortifying the gendered division of labor.

Respondents’ describe their husbands as “supportive” or “helpful” but mostly uninvolved in the daily educating of their children. In the next three sections I examine racial variation in respondents’ accounts of (1) rewards, (2) challenges, and (3) sources of support for managing homeschooling.

Rewards: Strengthening the Family

While women are primarily responsible for carrying out the homeschooling of their children, despite the enormity of this responsibility respondents are also quick to associate the rewards of homeschooling with the strengthening of family. Sarah, a white single mother of one, expressed the following rewards of homeschooling:

I love the amount of time that I can spend with him [son] and that I see first-hand his progress. I think that is the most rewarding thing for me... When we [public schooled], I was always handing him off to other people to take care. It was kind of depressing, all those things that I was missing, I don't miss them anymore. I am there day in and day out. It's amazing to see and [to] understand where he is... our relationship has gotten a lot stronger because of it.

Sarah’s response highlights how she views homeschooling as rewarding because the arrangement allows her to be deeply involved in her son’s daily learning. She links the increased time spent together as strengthening their relationship. This is “being there” for her child. Stressing “I’m here day in and day out,” Sarah’s explanation reflects Damaske’s (2011) research in that women frame their relationship to family in self-sacrificing ways. Women reflect on cultural logics
both of what it means to care for a family, and to perform appropriate motherhood. In a contemporary moment when women’s labor force participation remains high (Cohany & Sok 2007), performing this form of intensive stay-at-home mothering requires navigating these dominant cultural narratives.

Victoria, a married white mother of one, also describes homeschooling as rewarding, and part of fulfilling her mothering responsibility:

[Homeschooling] is rewarding. It’s fulfilling. I truly believe it’s the role that God laid out for me. I clearly want the best for my daughter as a mother, so that would just carry over; I clearly want the best for my daughter by way of her education. I truly feel I’m giving her that. Not to say that if she was to go to a public school she would be getting an inferior education, not at all, but this situation is the best for the three of us.

For Victoria, wanting the best for her daughter is linked to homeschooling her, because she sees it as the best option given her daughter’s learning style and personality. Unlike most of the respondents, she sacralizes her homeschool mothering responsibilities, suggesting they meet the “role that God laid out” for her. But, like many mothers, she simultaneously individualizes her choice: it’s what’s best for her particular child.

Across groups, respondents consistently express the rewards of homeschooling as allowing for prioritizing family whether through increased time together, individualizing learning, or flexible schedules for both mother and child. Rather than resist, many women emphasize taking pleasure in the way homeschooling allows them to fulfill their gendered responsibilities. Michelle, who is white and married, highlights the latter; homeschooling brings less stress than other schooling choices to her family because it allows for a flexible schedule:
I find it [homeschooling] a lot less stressful because [before I was] going to the school constantly. [It] was a huge energy and time waster. . . [now] she’s hunkering down doing the lesson, I can put a load of wash in, and make spaghetti for later. I can still get things done whereas before . . . her school was about fifteen minutes away, so [I went] back and forth to the school. . . I’m sure it sounds counterintuitive, [but] I find it much less stressful and it’s a lot easier for me to get things done at home.

This flexible schedule is a reward, Michelle suggests, because it allows her to fulfill what she sees as her domestic responsibilities—both housework and childrearing. She is able to multi-task, teaching her daughter while simultaneously doing laundry and preparing meals. This ability to multi-task, while being there for her child’s learning, is what she, and many other mothers, express as the benefits of homeschooling.

Black mothers point to the same rewards of homeschooling; they too say it allows them to strengthen their family unit not only by increasing family time but also by providing flexible schedules for themselves as well as their children. For example, Irma, a married black homeschooling mother of four, describes the joys of homeschooling:

I like that they [children] are a family unit. I like the fact that they have a lot of flexibility in their schedule . . . My daughter doesn’t have to be done by four in the afternoon, if there’s something she wants to do before that, she obviously has the ability to finish up her school day and do whatever she wants . . . Because we homeschool they don’t have to be in school every second of the day. We have the flexibility. We have that luxury.

Saying “We have the flexibility. We have that luxury,” she praises homeschooling by merging her own flexibility with that of her daughter. Like Michelle, then, Irma highlights the rewards of homeschooling by emphasizing the availability of a kind of schedule flexibility she sees as allowing for both a rigorous academic curriculum and leisure time spent together as a family.
Similar to Victoria (from above), Viola, a black married mother of four, also describes the rewards of homeschooling as allowing for more family time and catering to individual children’s learning needs:

I like having the kids with me and being able to help them the way they need to be helped. . . . I know it’s harder when you’re in school and there are a lot of other kids but I can pay attention, I mean [my daughter] is one who has needed it most. [In terms of] figuring out what best works for her learning styles. [My son] I’m able to give him the things that he needs and let him play when he is wanting to play.

For Viola, like others, the benefits of homeschooling include the amount of time she and her children spend together, while also being able to cater to each child’s learning style.

Grace, a black mother of three, also highlights family time, and flexibility as what is most rewarding about homeschooling:

Having the time in our day and our routine, having a priority on family so that we have the relationship where we can have those discussions and the time and the priority to work through it, talk about it . . . Just the fact that we have the freedom to do that, cause if school were running our lives, I don’t know how well I would even know my children. We would be more disconnected just by virtue of not being together all of the time and not being able to go through all of the ups and downs.

The flexibility of schedule and the amount of family time that homeschooling affords, are what Grace, and other respondents consistently describe as the real benefits of homeschooling. As discussed in the next section, these benefits, combined with the responsibility of the work, are also what both white and black mothers identify as the major challenge of homeschooling.

Challenges: “I’m Never Off”
While highlighting many rewards to homeschooling, both white and black respondents also reflect challenges. For example, Joy, a white mother of two, describes homeschooling as an extension of her mothering, emphasizing managing the enormity of this responsibility as a challenge: “You hate to put your kids as part of your self-worth but you’re responsible for how they look. You’re responsible for how they act, and now you’re responsible for what they know. You’re responsible for every aspect of them.” Through homeschooling, Joy finds mothering responsibilities grow. Not only is she responsible for how her children act, but she is also responsible for “what they know.” While non-homeschoolers likely also feel responsible for what their child knows, some of this responsibility may get displaced onto other adults, such as school teachers. Yet for homeschoolers like Joy, when the school teacher is also the mother, this sense of responsibility is concentrated on her, as opposed to dispersed across several adults. Across race, respondents expressed the challenges of homeschooling in terms of managing the enormity of this responsibility. It is the decision to homeschool that adds to this pressure, while framed as a reflection of cultural norms that place the responsibility of raising children primarily on mothers.

Michelle, the married white mother of one from above, also explains some of the challenges of homeschooling as the enormity of the responsibility:

I’m never off. I start in the morning and though [my daughter] is not up yet, I’m doing the housewife stuff. I start the load of laundry and then I’m figuring out, “ok these are the things I have prepared that she can choose from,” because I prep [lessons] ahead of time and then I’ll give her some options . . . it’s not like “oh, it’s four o’clock, we’re done.” She might be done. Now I’m going on to the next thing. It’s a huge time commitment; it’s a labor of love, let me tell you.
Michelle points to challenges that are not just about the responsibility of homeschooling, but also in managing the unbounded nature of this work. Her position as primary educator blends into other reproductive responsibilities that are involved in maintaining the home, such as doing the laundry and other housework.

Many respondents’ express unclear divisions between these different forms of labor, demonstrating how homeschooling becomes an additional task: part of the gendered division of reproductive labor. Because they are home all day, respondents feel responsible for not just the educating and caring, but also the housework (cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, grocery shopping). Michelle and other homeschoolers describe the challenge of homeschooling as partly due to the blurred lines between work and leisure. They accomplish housework alongside teaching and caring for children. After a full day of caring and teaching, cooking meals and keeping up with other housework, Michelle and other respondents spend evenings preparing lesson plans after their children are in bed. This leaves them never “done,” alluding to Jennifer Lois’ (2013) research that shows how white homeschooling mothers manage the intensity of this work that is never finished. Lois finds women focus on the temporality of homeschooling to put the intensity of the work in perspective by reminding herself that her children will eventually grow up, at which point she will no longer be their primary educator and care provider.

For example, Mary, a married white mother of five, reflects on the challenge of juggling these responsibilities:

In some ways, the most challenging piece is just actually making sure that the things that you want to happen, happen. Whether that means “okay,
I’m actually going to make sure that by the end of the day we have a good supper and that we have clothes to wear the next day.” The truth is, being a homeschooling mom is a full-time job. Even though it’s a job that happens in the home and I could be doing the dishes while I do it, it still is a big job. . . . I would say the hardest part is being able to manage your time so that everything gets done and that you don’t feel like your short changing one aspect of it.

Like Michelle, Mary explains that her biggest challenge is juggling the responsibilities, making sure that she teaches her children each day, while also keeping up with housework. Ensuring this all happens is “a full-time job” and a responsibility that she takes seriously, since she sees her children’s future riding on her ability to effectively juggle these tasks.

As with the white homeschoolers, black respondents expressed a similar challenge. For example, Julia, a married black mother of seven, describes homeschooling as a juggling act in teaching and caring for children, while keeping up with housework:

I would have plans, the baby should be napping now, but then the baby wasn’t napping. It was like, “What do you do?” If I had had structure, I think then I might have been able to say to my son, “Go and do this math page.” Get over the fact that it’s a workbook. Rather than, “Oh, the baby’s crying. Well, [son] we can’t do the unit study now.” The best way to teach in homeschooling is a balanced mixture of both; of structure and the flexible unit-type studies to spice it up, and each person has to find that balance.

As a more experienced homeschooler, Julia reflects on her homeschooling as evolving to have a better balance between structure and flexibility. Yet underlying the need for balance is the expressed enormity of the responsibility, juggling care for seven children, while catering her lesson plans for each child’s specific grade level.
Like the white homeschoolers, most black mothers also expressed how the challenge of juggling these responsibilities brought self-doubt. Lonnette, a married, black mother of two, expresses this doubt:

I think the biggest challenges have always been, “Am I doing enough?” But once [my son] went to school, I realized it was fine. He’s done really well, and then I realized that homeschooling would be the best environment for my daughter, because I saw the demands. They have different personalities. He can take the rote stuff that’s boring; he’s more compliant. But her personality isn’t like that, so she’s going to rebel, and complain and not do it. I’m like, “that’s [public school] just not going to work.”

Lonnette expresses the challenges of homeschooling as the doubt that comes with it; she is constantly wondering if she is doing enough for her children’s education. Homeschooling allows her to individualize the homeschool curriculum to fit each child’s very different learning styles and personalities, yet the very thing that makes homeschooling appealing—catering to the child’s individual learning style—is also what makes it most challenging because it relies on her ingenuity in developing a curriculum that caters to each child. Constant doubt is linked to this ingenuity and the value placed on the responsibility.

Hilda, a married black mother of three grown children, who at the time of our interview was homeschooling her four grandchildren, articulates some of these same challenges. She juggles the responsibility of caring for younger grandchildren, while providing individualized class sessions for older ones. She states: “It [homeschooling] is hard work. But, it’s work that I enter into. I do want to do it because I see the end of the tunnel. I see what’s going to happen to them.” Despite her different relationship to the children she homeschools, as their grandmother, her response is consistent with other respondents; homeschooling is both
rewarding and taxing, but seen as best for the individual child. Choosing this option is part of fulfilling mothering, or grand-mothering, responsibilities. Homeschooling is both rewarding as well as an emotionally draining and intense “full-time job.” By prioritizing children’s education, homeschooling helps fulfill what it means to be a good mother. Across race, respondents share assessments of not only its rewards but also its challenges.

Managing Through Supports

There are notable divergences by race in the ways these mothers manage the intensity of homeschooling; these differences are apparent in their homeschool supports. As Table 4.2 shows, while some black mothers (n=5) rely exclusively on extended kin for homeschool support, no white mothers rely only on such support. In contrast, white mothers are more likely to rely exclusively on other homeschoolers for support (13 whites, 6 blacks). In addition, more white than black mothers receive support from both extended kin and other homeschoolers (4 whites, 1 black). Still several mothers across groups report receiving no external homeschool support (4 whites, 5 blacks) (see Table 4.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.2 Homeschool Support</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White Homeschoolers (n=21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended Kin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Homeschoolers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No External Support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These differences are apparent in the ways they talk about homeschooling and social support. Most white mothers explain that they rarely get support from
extended kin but seek homeschool support through the predominantly white homeschooling groups in the region. For example, Gail, a white married mother of two, explains her experience finding homeschool support through other white homeschoolers in the region, while her extended kin remain skeptical of homeschooling:

A lot of people don’t support me. . . . I do have [homeschool] friends. We meet each other at least once a month. Today we were suppose to go to the zoo but it was too expensive. My family’s close. I talk to them like at least once a week . . . my aunt watches [my son]. [But] she’ll always be like “Don’t you need a teaching degree for that?” And I’m like, “I have my bachelor’s degree in computer science.”

While Gail sees her extended family more frequently than many homeschoolers (weekly as opposed to monthly), she experiences skepticism from her extended kin regarding her decision to homeschool. Gail does find support from other homeschoolers, even though she is not always able to join some of their organized activities due to the cost.

Similarly, Joan, a white married homeschooler of two, explains how her extended kin are unsupportive of homeschooling:

In my family, if you have boys you send them to an all boys prep school where they wear a jacket and tie. They will whip them into shape. They will mold them so that they are successful. . . . That works for [my extended family]. I sort of recoil when I think of that. Homeschooling [is seen as] not very disciplined [in my family]. So it’s like "well your kids need to be disciplined."

Joan expresses the challenge of interacting with her extended kin who are unsupportive of her decision to homeschool. She recognizes their differing views on schooling; they prioritize discipline and rigor, something she describes as part of the problem her son faced in the conventional school and what led her to homeschool.
While white respondents experience little support from extended kin, most express relying on the support of other homeschoolers. For example, Kimberly, a white married mother of three, describes finding similar supports from the white homeschooling community in the region: “I definitely have a really good group of homeschooling parents to talk about pedagogy or just challenges, which is great because people can step up with resources.” For Kimberly, finding homeschool support through other homeschoolers is not only useful for talking through challenges but also developing approaches to teaching. Victoria explains accessing support through other homeschoolers in the region in a similar way:

I’m in so many different homeschool groups. In particular, I am very active with the Catholic homeschool group. And we’re all great friends and we have lots of activities, for the moms and with the kids. I have a great support system.

As these mothers articulate, despite facing skepticism from extended kin, white homeschool respondents find support for the intensive work of homeschooling through other homeschooling groups in the region.

Both white and black respondents consistently report that homeschool groups are predominately run by white mothers. White mothers rely on these other homeschoolers for a range of supports to manage the intensity of homeschooling. They share teaching responsibilities, while also providing and receiving emotional support for managing the intensity of homeschooling. They seek these supports not out of material necessity for their family, but as the result of their choice to opt out of conventional schools by educating their children primarily themselves. This choice comes with having to navigate skepticism from extended kin.
Despite variation in their involvement in the homeschool community, most of the black respondents express feeling relatively isolated from other black homeschoolers in the region. This isolation was made especially apparent after eight black respondents asked me to put them in touch with each other to form a regional black homeschool support group. These respondents describe managing isolation in different ways. Some continue to be involved in white homeschool groups, others find support primarily through extended kin, while others draw on both homeschool groups and extended kin for support.

Jazmine, a black married mother of two, explains some of the challenges around finding support as a black homeschooling mom:

I don’t talk to anyone [about homeschooling] because in my black group, there’s no one to talk to. Black people normally don’t homeschool. . . . A lot of the older black women in my church, they had careers, they send their kids to daycare, they send their kids to public schools. Homeschooling is very white. This whole homeschooling adventure hasn’t been about ruining his [son’s] blackness . . . we’re doing this because we want to keep the team [family] together. It’s tough. I’m black and I’m a stay at home mom and this is rare. Black women work, that’s the standard.

Jazmine describes finding little support for homeschooling, which she identifies as the result of the whiteness of homeschool groups. She indicates the concerns of white homeschoolers are different than those of black homeschoolers. Her response highlights her navigation of cultural narratives around the importance of black women’s workforce participation as distinct from the work-family conflict that dominates narratives of white women. Many other black respondents express this dominant narrative as a barrier relating to the white homeschooling community. This contrasts with the expectations of the black middle-class mothers in Dow’s (2016a) study: they engage an integrated mothering model that
combines—rather than opposes—employment with family responsibilities. As Jazmine articulates, being a stay-at-home homeschooling mother conflicts with dominant cultural narratives around the importance of black women engaging an integrated mothering in which employment is combined with family responsibilities. Despite this, Jazmine feels strongly that homeschooling is important for her son and family’s connection; she is not trying to deny his racial identity, or “blackness,” but rather keep the nuclear family together. Like the black professional women in Riche Barne’s (2016) study, respondents resist the strong black woman myth and expectations to combine work and family, and instead focus on “raising the race”; they prioritize family through educating children in the safety of their home.

Like Jazmine, Lonnette, a black married mother of two, is not involved in homeschool groups in the region. She is less explicit than Jazmine in explaining her reasons for this. Instead, she draws on the support of her extended kin (her parents) to manage the intensity of homeschooling:

I talk to my parents. They told me what they thought would work best. They were actually against the whole homeschooling thing but they understood why I went out. They [parents] helped me out and told me that I was doing well in protecting him. They’ve [parents] always been supportive of other extra-curricular educational activities, that’s always been a big help. I’ve noticed a lot of parents have been homeschooling their kids because of learning issues of some sort ... that wasn’t the reason why I pulled him [son], it was because the teachers were keeping him [from] learning by spending time in the principal’s office and that’s kind of sad.

Many black respondents draw such support from extended kin, despite their not having homeschooling experience. Importantly, Lonnette suggests it is the racial discrimination from teachers who were keeping her son from learning that led her
to homeschool. Her account alludes to Ferguson’s (2001) study with black boys that shows how the discriminatory practices of school administrators and teachers frame black boys as trouble makers, placing them at a disadvantage in the classroom. Lonnette explains removing her son from public school to protect him from similar discriminatory practices. This also aligns with Mazama and Lundy’s (2012) study with black homeschoolers in the Southern United States that finds these families homeschool to protect children from racial discrimination in schools. Yet many black respondents express homeschooling comes with isolation. Lonnette turns to her own parents for support, since she finds the other (white) homeschoolers in her region have very different reasons for deciding to homeschool (i.e. “learning issues”). Lonnette, along with many of the other black respondents seek support from extended kin because they understand the racial implications of their choice in ways that white homeschoolers do not.

None of the black respondents’ extended families had experience homeschooling. Yet many of them provide care and teaching support. For example, in discussing the challenges of homeschooling, Sandy shares her reliance on her mother’s help with teaching and caring for her children: “There’s so much as a mom, even though my mom is doing the primary educating. That’s the challenging part. It’s been hard for me to connect to the homeschool community, so my sons don’t have playmates except for themselves.” Despite the support her own mother provides, Sandy finds mothering and homeschooling to be challenging in part due to the isolation she experiences. She has not found a homeschool community to be a part of, which she attributes to issues with transportation, since her husband works
full-time and they only have one car. The homeschool groups in the region meet in areas that are inaccessible to her without a car. Sandy, her husband, and three sons live with her retired mother. By living together, Sandy can share the homeschooling work with her mother, while developing her home-business. In contrast to white mothers who all report they were primary educators to their children, along with Sandy, two other black mothers draw upon extended kin (elder women) to do the primary home educating.

The role of extended kin varies by race. Compared to black mothers, whites are more likely to receive homeschool support from other homeschoolers. Yet, the lack of homeschool support from extended kin does not necessary mean they are uninvolved in the family’s life; six white mothers report providing support to sick or elderly family members on a regular basis while also homeschooling. In contrast, black mothers report receiving homeschool support from their extended kin (parents), while just one mother reports providing regular care to an elderly parent. In addition, two black respondents are the primary home educators as well as care providers for extended kin (grandchildren/grandniece).

Like white respondents, black mothers’ accounts reflect the challenges of managing the intensity of homeschooling, particularly in the amount of time spent with their children. Yet they also express challenges of homeschooling as black mothers, which for many leads to feeling isolated from the white homeschooling families in the region. To counter this, they seek supports through non-homeschoolers (extended family), yet there remain challenges in navigating the often unclear terrain of homeschooling, especially when first starting out.
Discussion and Analysis

Prior research with non-homeschooling class advantaged families shows that race shapes how they “do” family and their use of supports; whites and blacks both rely on the nuclear family, yet whites often seek paid childcare support, while blacks seek childcare from extended kin due in part to concern of racial discrimination in paid childcare centers (Cooper 2009; Damaske 2011; Dow 2016a, 2016b; Gerstel 2011; Uttal 1999). Contributing to this scholarship by considering families who opt out of conventional schools to homeschool, the mothers in this study report “doing” family in ways that vary by race; most white respondents rely on the nuclear family while seeking the support of other (white) homeschoolers. Black respondents also rely on nuclear family, but are more likely to face challenges in finding support. This leads many to seek homeschool support from extended kin (parents), some find support through other homeschoolers, while still others go it alone. This suggests that homeschooling may create an added toll on black families, particularly for black women, who remain on the margins of homeschool networks. Conversely, white mothers have access to these homeschool supports—a place where important information and shared experiences are exchanged—through other homeschoolers. Yet in contrast to black homeschoolers, most whites find extended kin are unsupportive of homeschooling, and distant in their daily lives. These findings show how both white and black mothers receive crucial homeschool support beyond the bounds of the nuclear family.

This study contributes to a central question within family scholarship regarding the structure and function of contemporary families. Litwak and
Szelenyi’s (1969) classic comparative study of the function of extended kin, neighbors and friends for nuclear families in Hungary and the U.S., finds that in a rapidly changing post-industrial society, the function of these networks adapt to geographical distances between groups. While extended kin provide enduring, long-term supports, neighbors and friends often provide more immediate supports due to their geographic proximity. More recent studies address shifts in structure and function of families in a variety of ways. For example, Bengston’s (2001) longitudinal study finds there is increasing importance in relationships across multiple generations. This is due to a variety of factors including the fact that people are living longer, leading to more shared years across generations. Yet in recent decades, less research examines distinctions between the support received from extended kin versus friends or neighbors, and how this may vary by race. This study is the first to examine racial variation in the support networks of homeschooling families, an important contribution given general consensus assumes homeschoolers rely so much on family because mothers serve as primary home educators. In addition, this study reinvigorates the distinction in support type, finding that support received from extended kin versus friends/other homeschoolers, is different for white and black families.

While across race respondents express homeschooling strengthens their nuclear family, they also engage varied relationships with extended kin. Studies with non-homeschooling black families find that stay-at-home mothers have been relatively rare and even stigmatized (Barnes 2016) compared to their white counterparts. This study finds black stay-at-home mothers who homeschool
navigate this tension through drawing on extended kin for support. This supports Lacy’s (2007) research showing that many black middle-class families balance their participation in white spaces by seeking connection through black communities, which are free from discrimination and affirming of their racial identities. Therefore, these findings show that broader definitions of family are crucial for understanding nuances in the lives of white and black contemporary families, including the lives of homeschoolers.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

Through the first four chapters of this dissertation, I have aimed to demonstrate that despite existing outside of the bounds of the traditional classroom, homeschooling is deeply shaped by the local context within which these families live and are reflective of broader inequities. My central frame of analysis is school choice as racialized mothering work, expanding on prior research that has either been conducted with conventional schooling families, or with homeschooling families. This research contributes to our understanding of the racial implications of school choice by investigating the schooling logics of a set of black homeschooling families, while making direct comparisons to white homeschool and conventional schoolers living in the same region. This research expands the existing literature in three ways.

First, schooling logics reflect racialized mothering work. Across school type, decisions rely on the relatively extensive labor of mothers. While homeschool mothers are more likely to remove themselves entirely from their careers to be the primary stay-at-home educator and care provider, I find many conventional school respondents remove themselves partially or fully to navigate schooling for their children as well. Yet the meaning mothers’ make of this gendered division of labor varies by race. More specifically, white mothers, whether public school or homeschool, draw on mothering narratives that involve prioritizing schools that “fit best” the individual attributes they associate with their child, yet also places them in predominately white academic settings. At the same time, they prioritize interracial
socialization in non-academic settings. In contrast, black mothers, whether public school or homeschool, draw on mothering narratives that reflect working to protect their children from racial discrimination in schools, whether intervening in schools, transferring schools, or homeschooling.

Second, I find reasons for homeschooling draw on new and old logics. A set of homeschooling families are engaging logics consistent with prior research. These mothers—both white and black—report religion as influencing their decision to homeschool, and avoid conventional schools altogether. Yet, a second set of homeschoolers expand the religious/secular binary most often reported within the existing literature. Across race these homeschoolers explain choices that are motivated by social, economic and human capital; for about half of the black homeschool respondents, knowing someone who homeschools influences their decision to homeschool instead of transferring their child to a different conventional school. When the responsibility of protecting children from discrimination falls on these individual families, mothers report using class resources and social networks to navigate these negative experiences. By comparing these choices across race, these findings suggest that white privilege influences white homeschoolers choices; in the absence of experiences of racial discrimination in schools, white homeschoolers prioritize individualizing their child’s education by prioritizing “best fit,” often leading to selecting whiter academic settings. These logics show how “choices” rely on families’ social, economic and human capital, and are shaped by racialized experiences within schools.
Finally, white and black homeschool respondents recount vastly different experiences based on their social networks. While respondents report similar rewards and challenges associated with homeschooling, they manage these challenges differently because homeschool supports are unequally accessible. Most white families seek primary support through other white homeschoolers in the region who share important information about homeschooling. Yet they report little homeschool support from extended kin. In contrast, while some black homeschoolers find support through the mostly white homeschoolers in the region, others express isolation from homeschoolers and instead rely on extended kin to navigate homeschooling as a black family. These findings suggest that the intersections of race and gender influence homeschoolers relationship with extended family, as well as their access to homeschool supports.

Theoretical Contributions

Gender, Race, and Family

This dissertation expands gender, race, family, and education scholarship on two fronts. First, the findings expand the intersections of gender and race in family life through examining an area mostly left unexamined: school choice. I find that schooling decisions—both homeschool and conventional school—draw on the intensive work of mothers. Women are disproportionately burdened with this responsibility, with fathers reported as “helpful” or “supportive” but primarily uninvolved in the daily work of educating and caring for children. Women’s narratives reflect the intensive work they do to navigate schooling options, while the meaning and experience of this work varies by race.
Prior studies examining gender inequality through mothering (Christopher 2013; Stone 2007; Williams 2000), including those with homeschooling mothers (Lois 2012), have problematized the rhetoric of choice for obscuring the structural gender inequalities embedded in workplaces. These studies show how work-family conflict is constructed as an individual concern that mothers confront alone, rather than a conflict embedded within the structural inequalities of the workplace. The ubiquity of intensive mothering, offers a cultural justification for women to give up on their career identities and return to the home (Hays 1996). My research expands on this choice rhetoric of work-family conflict by examining another dominant institution that shapes family life: schools. My study starts with the experiences of homeschooling mothers to compare their schooling logics to conventionally schooling mothers, while examining how decisions around schooling are connected to understandings of mothering.

Similar to work-family conflict, I find that school-family conflict is also a realm that is constructed as an individual concern that mothers most often confront alone. Yet, like the structural inequalities embedded in workplaces, the logic of choice is embedded within the structural inequalities of schools. This combined with the ubiquity of intensive mothering influences these class advantaged women’s “choice” to prioritize their child’s education through using cultural logics that justify letting go of their career identities and returning to the home whether partially or fully.

These logics also reflect racialized notions of motherhood. Scholars have shown how ubiquitous the cultural schemas of “intensive mothering” remain and
how this is linked to making “good mothering” models appear white and middle-class (Collins 2000:77; Collins 1994; Elliott, Powell and Brenton 2015). Recent studies also show that across race and class locations, women engage in modified versions of intensive mothering. For example, some mothers may remain primarily responsible for childrearing yet delegate some responsibilities to paid women caregivers or educators (Christopher 2013; 2012). Other class advantaged black mothers may rely on kin support, financial independence, and an emphasis on marriage stability as a means for achieving integrated mothering ideals (Barnes 2016; Dow 2016).

Similarly, my research finds race shapes women’s mothering logics. Yet, I also find schooling logics intersect with mothering ideals; while across race singular path homeschoolers are most likely to hold traditional intensive mothering ideals, these ideals hold racialized meanings. The meaning that white mothers attribute to this logic aligns with their social networks—friends and extended kin. In contrast, most black mothers report a disconnect with their social networks as a result of opting out of traditional black mothering narratives, that integrate work and family, to be stay-at-home mothers and homeschoolers. Unlike white homeschoolers, for some black respondents the choice to homeschool involves not only navigating stigma for making an alternative schooling choice, but also navigating stigma from “doing” family in ways that don’t align with traditional black mothering ideals.

In contrast to the singular path homeschoolers, conventional schoolers and phase path homeschoolers engage mothering narratives that align with existing research (Gerson 2010; Lois 2012); the choice to homeschool is contested and
perhaps part of why they did not consider it earlier. These mothers end up following
traditional gender divisions of labor not necessarily because they believe in
traditional gender divisions of labor per se, but because they believe homeschooling
is the best option for their child and find themselves, as opposed to their husbands,
more able to remove themselves from the paid labor force to homeschool. These
mothers reflect shifts in cultural logic of motherhood, yet these logics clash with
gendered structural arrangements in education policies of choice that place the
responsibility of education quality onto individual families, pushing mothers to
leave the workplace to navigate their child’s education.

Along with facing differing cultural ideals and structural arrangements,
consistent with prior research with *non-homeschooling* families, I find white and
black homeschooling mothers rely on different supports. Scholars have documented
how relying primarily on the nuclear family is more specific to how white, middle-
class individuals “do” family (Collins 1994; Gerstel 2011; Uttal 1999). In contrast,
families of color, immigrant families, and low-income families rely on supports from
extended kin, as well as fictive kin, or those who are not related by blood (Collins
1994; Dow 2016a, 2016b; Gerstel 2011; Sarkisian & Gerstel 2004; Taylor et al 2015;
Uttal 1999). For low-income black mothers these supports may be crucial for family
survival (Collins 1994). Yet even class advantaged black mothers may rely on
extended kin for support in caring for children, despite their relative financial
security as a means for ensuring avoidance of racial discrimination and building
relationships between children and kin (Dow 2016a, 2016b; Uttal 1999).
This dissertation expands on this existing research by finding homeschooling may lead black mothers to rely on extended kin for support, while whites experience more distance from kin for homeschooling. In particular, black homeschool mothers report social isolation from black public schooling families and the white homeschool community, which leads to their reliance on extended kin for support in their alternative school choice. In contrast, white homeschool mothers report a distancing from extended kin for their decision to homeschool and instead rely on the support of other white homeschooling mothers in the region to navigate their alternative school choice. These findings contribute to existing research by showing how race and schooling choice shapes the way that family is “done” in white and black class advantaged families.

**Gender, Race and Schooling**

In addition to contributing to research on family, this study also extends education research. Prior studies, even those interested in inequality, focus on families who send their children to traditional public schools, charter schools, and private schools (Barnes 2016; Griffith and Smith 2005; Lareau and Goyette 2014), while mostly leaving out those families choosing to homeschool. Yet U.S. survey data show much growth over the past two decades in the number of white and black homeschooling families (NCES 2015). The few qualitative studies with homeschoolers tends to focus exclusively on them, without examining how the intensive mothering involved in homeschooling (Lois 2012) compares to the division of labor involved in conventional schooling families. My dissertation contributes to this existing research by showing that schooling decisions—both
homeschool and public school—draws on the intensive labor of mothers. In addition, school choice initiatives may be reliant on this unpaid labor of mothers, yet political discourse and public debates appear to invisible the gendered nature of this work.

Homeschoolers demonstrate a heightened case of intensive mothering through school choice. Not only do these respondents engage this process through the school selection process, their choice involves providing the bulk of their child's education themselves, transferring them out of schools that are not accommodating them. My data highlights the way that homeschooling transfers labor from paid school teachers to unpaid, yet often highly educated, women who are removing themselves fully or partially from their careers for the education of their children. This shows how structural inequalities—unequal access to high quality schools—reinforces gender inequalities.

Prior research on homeschooling finds white families engage in various aspects of intensive mothering (Lois 2012). Research with black homeschoolers finds they choose to homeschool to protect their children from racial discrimination in schools (Mazama and Lundy 2012). This study builds on these foundational studies to examine the racial and gender implications of these families’ schooling logics, and how it compares to the logics of conventional schoolers. The research makes contributions to research on black families’ schooling logics. Studies with black non-homeschooling families has primarily focused on working class and poor families to find these students tend to be concentrated in schools with fewer resources than their white counterparts (Billingham & Hunt 2016; Frankenberg
These students develop strategies for navigating white spaces (Carter 2005; Cooper 2007; Lacy 2007; Lareau & Horvat 1999; Martin 2008; Moore 2005; Patillo 2015). For example, Carter (2005) finds that among these students, those who are upwardly mobile, learn to become “cultural straddlers” through moving between the middle class white space of school and their black homes and communities. Students learn to express the differing cultural capital that is valued in each space.

My research builds on these important studies by offering a comparative analysis for the way that middle-class black families navigate school choice, and how this compares to that of their white counterparts. In particular, like the black middle-class non-homeschooling families in Dow’s research that finds extended kin serve a crucial role for navigating racial discrimination in other social institutions (Dow 2015), I find black homeschoolers seek extended kin for support. This is due in part to reasons for homeschooling in response to discriminatory practices in schools being so different from the reasons for homeschooling that whites report. In addition, this study expands upon prior research that finds black boys experience discrimination within conventional schools that frame them as aggressive and violent and may lead some families to homeschool (Ferguson 2001; Fields-Smith and Kisura 2013; Mazama and Lundy 2012). Respondents report not just black sons, but black daughters being framed by conventional schools as threatening; avoiding this discrimination is part of respondents’ reasoning for homeschooling.

The research also makes contributions to research on white families’ schooling logics. Studies theorizing whiteness in school choice has focused on non-
*homeschooling* families. Scholars find whites’ schooling decisions often reinforce the racial status quo and racial segregation (Billingham and Hunt 2016; Hagerman 2014; Roda and Wells 2013); regardless of a schools’ academic performance, higher racial minority composition of school districts, particularly black students, negatively influences the number of white middle-class families sending their children to the public schools in the district (Bankston and Caldas 2000; Billingham and Hunt 2016; Dougherty et al. 2009; Emerson, Chai, and Yancey 2001; Frankenberg 2013). Yet even for those whites who select into more integrated schools, these families draw on race and class privilege to manage the anxiety they express in making this decision (Cucchiara 2013). In a similar way, I find that across homeschool and conventional school families, express schooling logics that place their children in whiter academic settings. Even among respondents who express support of race and class integration, they pick and choose which integrated setting to enroll their child. Their logics reflect partial white flight, by seeking segregated academic, yet integrated extra-curricular settings. These mothers’ anxieties about their children’s middle class futures reflect the privilege of whiteness in being able to pick and choose when to engage their children in race and class diverse settings.

**Broader Implications**

These findings have broader implications for education debates and family life discourse. In terms of education debates, prior conceptualizations of homeschooling have primarily focused on two sorts of homeschool motivations. Stevens (2001) refers to the first as “believers,” or religiously motivated beliefs in the importance of nuclear family and protecting children from non-religious beliefs
prevalent in conventional schools. He refers to the second set as “inclusives,” or
those who are concerned about schools’ learning environment, particularly the
structured nature of school; inclusives have been associated with the educator and
homeschool leader, John Holt, whose writing in support of homeschooling was
prevalent in the 1970s and 80s. His influences are seen in contemporary
homeschool literature among those who refer to themselves as “unschoolers”—or
who embrace an unstructured approach to learning. Indeed, recent survey data
supports the continued prevalence of these two fundamental approaches to
homeschool decisions in which nearly one third of homeschoolers list religious
teaching as the most important reason for homeschooling, while an additional third
indicate concern with school environment as the most important reason for
homeschooling (NCES 2015). My qualitative data support these findings in that
nearly one half of homeschool mothers do explain their decision as based on
religious values, yet I find a second set of homeschoolers are coming to
homeschooling in a very different way.

This second set of black and white homeschoolers explain their choice not
because they have always wanted to homeschool, but rather because they see it as
the best way to navigate a conventional schooling experience gone amiss. These
findings align with Lois (2012) “second choicers” in that she too finds a set of
homeschoolers are coming to homeschooling not because they always wanted to
homeschool but through accommodating their child’s need. Yet, my findings expand
on this research through the direct comparisons across race and to conventional
schoolers; I find that across groups mothers’ are using their class privilege to respond to school choice rhetoric in ways that are racialized.

In contrast to the “single” path, I refer to this set of homeschooling families as “phase” to reflect the different schooling phases they go through in meeting their child’s schooling needs—homeschool, public, charter and for some private. These mothers are meeting the failings of the school system by taking it upon themselves to cater to their child’s individual learning needs by providing the education at home, as opposed to continuing to try to make conventional school fit their child. Their responses are reflective of the current emphasis on individualism that is part of school choice initiatives in the region and nationally. Their schooling logics parallel their conventionally schooling counterparts, in taking it upon themselves to cater to their child’s individual learning needs, yet the primary distinguishing factor are social networks; whether they know and are close to someone who homeschools.

This dissertation builds on existing research by furthering our understanding of why homeschooling families make the schooling decisions that they do, and how they are similar or distinct from their public schooling counterparts. I find that decisions around schooling are shaped by structural inequalities that are embedded in schools and the resources available to families. When schooling situations arise in which families are unsatisfied, those with more resources may choose to transfer schools or homeschool. This presumably leaves those with fewer resources behind. These “choices” appear to maintain, as oppose to reduce, gender, race and class inequalities across families, while furthering class disparities across schools. These
logics reflect the inequalities that families—across schooling type—confront in their daily lives. My findings support policy initiatives invested in seeking equity across schools so that no family is “left behind” in under resourced schools.

The women in this study face a central tension that has been examined by gender scholars for decades, can women have it all—career and family? Most of my study respondents are highly educated, having spent years pursuing college and advanced degrees, while many have also spent years in successful careers. Yet most respondents (76%) have removed themselves partially or fully to care for and ensure a quality education for their children (see Table 5.1 below). These findings show that gender inequality is embedded in families’ navigation of school choice. The intensive work involved in selecting a school primarily relies on the unpaid labor of women with children. When a child is struggling in school, mothers intervene on their child’s behalf. Women with more resources may transfer their child to a different school, or even homeschool, yet this often leaves these women facing the choice to either pull back or opt out of the labor force. While those women with fewer resources, find themselves facing fewer schooling options because of less flexible work schedules.

These findings contrast with prior research, particularly Damaske’s (2011) study that finds middle class women are more likely to be able to remain in the workforce than working class mothers due to resources that allow women to pay for high quality care and education. This divergence may be in part due to the centering of homeschoolers in my research; consistent with prior research I find homeschooling families are especially likely to rely on women’s removal from the
labor force entirely or partially (Lois 2012). Given the increasing number of families choosing to homeschool, these findings are particularly troubling for those concerned with gender equity and family well-being.

As Damaske (2011) calls for in her research with working-class and middle-class women with children, moving beyond frames of need and choice to create new ways for understanding women’s labor is crucial for gender equity. Cultural shifts over the past several decades show that middle-class mothers and fathers are facing a time squeeze that leaves them wishing they could spend more time as a family (Jacobs and Gerson 2004). While many young adults may increasingly hold gender equitable ideals for divisions of labor, in practice these arrangements are hard to meet, in part due to workplaces that lack family policies conducive to dual earner households (Gerson 2011). Instead of family needs being met through the unpaid labor of women, families’ needs could be met through workplaces that offer paid parental leave and policies that offer affordable high-quality childcare and schooling.

In short, school choice is a gender and race equity issue. All families should have access to a quality education for their child. Yet, despite how it may seem, schooling choices are not equally accessible. Families with fewer resources report more constraint in the “choices” available to them, while the burden of ensuring children receive a quality education ends up falling on individual mothers, adding additional labor to women’s second shift (Hochschild 1989). In addition, race shapes the work involved in navigating school choice, with many of the black mothers in this study explaining their choices as driven by their attempts to protect their
children from racial discrimination in schools. In contrast, white mothers’ narratives reflect the privilege of whiteness by their focus on schooling options that “best fit” the academic needs of their child, without concern of discrimination. Mothers oversee their child’s schooling, and in the case of homeschoolers, often leave careers to provide their child’s primary education. By improving our public schools, we can minimize the vast inequalities that exist among American school children, while also reducing the racialized and gendered burden that school choice places on individual families.

Table 5.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White Homeschool (n=21)</th>
<th>Black Homeschool (n=17)</th>
<th>White Convent. (n=14)</th>
<th>Black Convent. (n=15)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>90% (19)</td>
<td>94% (16)</td>
<td>100% (14)</td>
<td>60% (9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single/Divorced</td>
<td>10% (2)</td>
<td>6% (1)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>40% (6)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>67% (14)</td>
<td>88% (15)</td>
<td>29% (4)</td>
<td>86% (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular</td>
<td>33% (7)</td>
<td>12% (2)</td>
<td>71% (10)</td>
<td>14% (2)</td>
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<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>High School/+</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>29% (4)</td>
<td>73% (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College/+</td>
<td>100% (21)</td>
<td>100% (17)</td>
<td>71% (10)</td>
<td>27% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No paid</td>
<td>38% (9)</td>
<td>47% (8)</td>
<td>29% (4)</td>
<td>27% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time paid</td>
<td>48% (10)</td>
<td>47% (8)</td>
<td>42% (6)</td>
<td>20% (3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Full-time paid</td>
<td>14% (2)</td>
<td>6% (1)</td>
<td>29% (4)</td>
<td>53% (8)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Partner Education</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School/+</td>
<td>21% (4)</td>
<td>56% (9)</td>
<td>14% (2)</td>
<td>67% (6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>College/+</td>
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<td>100% (14)</td>
<td>100% (9)</td>
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<td>13% (2)</td>
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<td>6% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
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<td>Above $200,000</td>
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<th>19% (4)</th>
<th>18% (3)</th>
<th>27% (4)</th>
<th>60% (9)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>71% (15)</td>
<td>76% (13)</td>
<td>73% (11)</td>
<td>40% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>10% (2)</td>
<td>6% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Middle Class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Label 5.1 All Respondent Demographics*


Cucchiara, Maia. 2013. “‘Are We Doing Damage?’ Choosing an Urban Public School in an Era of Parental Anxiety.” Anthropology & Education Quarterly 44(1):75-93.


____. 2016c. “Parent and Family Involvement in Education: Results from the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2016.”


Source. 2016.
Source. 2013.


Strauss, Valerie. 2017. “Homeschooling was once a rising trend. New data shows something different.”


