Making the Invisible Visible: A Mixed Methods Investigation of Women and Families Choosing
Elementary Schools in Seattle

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Abstract

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School choice is an education reform fueled by parents. Knowing what parents are looking for in schools and how they make choices is essential for researchers and policy makers to understand whether school choice will indeed improve educational outcomes. While many researchers have investigated parental preferences in school choice, very few have sought to understand how gender and intra-family dynamics shape school preferences and the choice process. This mixed methods study investigated school choice amongst active, first time elementary school choosers in Seattle using interviews with eight mothers over the course of the six month choosing process and a survey of 70 choosers. The findings suggest that school choice is women's work. Mothers bear the brunt of school choice activities, engage their mom networks (including preschools) to gather information, and grapple with difficult questions about family priorities and personal values in relation to schools. Parents express ambivalence about the use of test scores to measure school quality and interest in more holistic notions of education. Most parents have difficulty "seeing" their preferences in action given the available information about schools. Amongst these mostly well-educated, middle class women, school choice can be seen as part of

an effort towards concerted cultivation and advancement and also as a space for debate and

consideration of larger political and ideological concerns about the nature of schooling.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation is a culmination of a decade's worth of effort towards becoming a scholar. Every step of the way, I found people in the University of Washington's College of Education who believed in me enough to make me feel like I had what it took: most notably, my advisor, Marge Plecki, who gave me opportunities for research and teaching and never stopped believing that I might actually "finish this thing." Thanks to Patrick Sexton, Elham Kazemi, and Todd and Leslie Herrenkohl, who believed in me enough to give me a job and then believed in me enough to let me quit so I could finish. I also want to thank Debby Kerdeman, the best, most intellectually challenging teacher I have ever had. She also stepped up to be the interim chair of my committee and saw me through to the end. Lastly, thank you to Sara Lopez and Jennifer Hoffman from the UW's Institute for Athletic Leadership, who kept wondering when I would finish and encouraging me to stay with it so I could come and help them with their great work, which I can't wait to do. Thank you, Jennifer, for your time, patience, and persistence; weekly meetings with you were ultimately what kept me on track. I can't thank you enough.

I started graduate school with two babies. Now I have three young men at home calling me "Mom." Whenever I told someone that I was having trouble making progress on my dissertation, they would say, "I can imagine, with three boys at home. That would be hard!" The truth is, the boys didn't make it difficult. They just brought activities and interests into our house that were a lot more compelling than academic research! (Whoever thought I would have become a baseball coach.) In the final stretch of getting this done, Evan, Jaden, and Alex were patient with my benign neglect of all things domestic. They fended for themselves as they cheered me on and asked, "Are you almost done?" Thank you boys! I'm done. Mama's back!

And Marc, thanks for never giving up hope but never pushing too hard. Your support and your doing the dishes every day paved the way for this to happen. Thank you. And to my brother and Mom and Dad – I know you can't believe it finally happened, but there's another doctor in the family. Thanks for your love and support.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In a recent article in the *New York Times Magazine*, Virginia Heffernan wondered why her fellow mothers were not outraged that the daily task of cooking is the purview of women. After recounting her "neural itch" that sets in around five o'clock as she has to figure out dinner, she said,

> worst of all, as the mother-cookbooks make painfully clear, the daily work of
>
> feeding children doesn't fall to the sages. Neither does it, notably, fall to the dads,
>
> whom the cookbooks commend for having signature dishes or being grill-masters,
>
> but not for punching the clock at breakfast, lunch and dinner. No, cooking
>
> belongs, inevitably, to the moms. (Heffernan, 2014, para. 6)

The same could be said about so many pieces of the domestic labor puzzle: housework, shopping, and child care is women's work. Even as women have moved into the paid work force in great numbers, they still bear the brunt of domestic labor (Fetterolf & Rudman, 2014; U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2008). Another piece of women's work, a corollary to child care, is school choice. Choosing where a child goes to kindergarten is primarily the work of women. Even more than cooking, choosing a school involves some serious intellectual heavy lifting, a major commitment of time— "this might as well be a part-time job" said one mother in this study—and a surprising amount of bureaucratic negotiation, research, soul-searching, and familial angst as my study revealed.

This particular line of women's work— school choice— is linked to a robust area of education reform. Market-based school reform is a model that has grown in popularity over the last 30 years, and it takes many shapes around the country, including charter schools, magnet

schools, and voucher systems (Feinberg & Lubienski, 2008; Walberg, 2007). These reforms are undergirded, in part, by the premise that parents will shop for the best schools for their children and thereby drive competition among schools and improve education quality (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hill, 1996; 2001; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000).

This is one of the unique aspects of school choice based reform: its reliance on parents. "Perhaps more than any other reform, school choice hinges on parents" (Bell, 2007, p. 376). Rational choice theory suggests that parents, as consumers, will weigh their preferences for schools (e.g., close to home, good test scores) with their constraints (affordable, transportation available) and maximize their utility by choosing the best school for their child (Bell, 2007; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000). These individual choices, school choice proponents argue, will fuel competition as schools compete to be chosen and individual choices aggregate to improve schools across the board as parents' preferences are met (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hill, 2000).

The majority of research about parental preferences has been undertaken through the conceptual lens of rational choice and the methodological mechanism of large-scale surveys. Those studies have found that parents prefer "academic" programs and that high-quality schooling motivates their choices (Goldring & Rowley, 2006; Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Teske & Schneider, 2001; Weiher & Tedin, 2001). However, parental preferences expressed through surveys are different from the way parents behave in school choice (Bell, 2005; Elacqua, 2005; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000). Recent work has therefore tried to broaden, epistemologically, the way parental choosing is viewed to better understand school choosing. Researchers like Courtney Bell, for example, have taken a look at how components of choosing deemed exogenous to choice by rational choice theorists are, in fact, very much in play in the

experiences of families. She has argued that parental preferences have important social, historical, and cultural contexts (2005) and advocated for more school choice research to open up the "black box" (p. 6) of parental choosing to more fully understand the phenomenon (2005).

This study attempted to do just that—open up the black box of parental choosing by making visible a number of the components of school choice rendered invisible by previous methodological, conceptual, and epistemological approaches to school choice. It looked inside the process of school choosing to understand what parents really do and care about *while* they are choosing which school their children will attend. The overarching research question was this: How do first-time kindergarten families make elementary school choices within an urban neighborhood assignment plan and how do social factors, particularly gender, shape their decision making?

This study tackled that question by looking at choice with a *gendered lens:* recognizing as vitally important the ways in which women have "a special relationship with the private sphere of the family" (Ribbens, 1993, p. 21) and how this role is integral to understanding what happens in school choosing. While I did not assume a woman's voice was the only one we should hear, I utilized methods, and was guided by questions, to build theory about women's involvement in school choice and explore the role of gender in familial decision making around school choice. As such, guiding subquestions included the following: In what ways are various family members engaged in school choosing? Do different members of the family play unique roles in the process and "work" associated with school choosing? What is the nature of the family decision-making process? What factors are weighed and debated within the family? How are individual values, preferences, and constraints weighed within the family?

This mixed methods study was set in Seattle, Washington. In 2010, the Seattle school district moved, in a reverse of current trends, from an intra-district choice system (whereby students could select any school in the city through a lottery) to an option-demand choice system through which students are assigned to their neighborhood school but parents can opt out of this assignment and enter a lottery for other choices. The district maintains 11 option schools, which act as magnets throughout the city, and there is a culture of choosing, evidenced by the high private school going rate of 25% of the elementary-age population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Other subquestions targeted the nature of familial response to Seattle's policy change: How is parental decision making shaped by the assignment plan and their attitudes towards it? What structural constraints, including policy constraints, do parents and families most grapple with during the process?

I interviewed eight women over 4–6 months of the school-choosing process in the winter and spring of 2010–11. All the women were first-time active choosers, meaning they were considering opting out of their assigned neighborhood school to attend an option school, a different neighborhood school, or a private or parochial school. As first-time choosers, they had not gone through this process for another child. I also surveyed 70 parents, men and women, recruited from public, private, and parochial school tours during the same timeframe.

The findings suggest that parents grappled with understanding what academic quality meant to them and how to see it given the available information. Further, I found that women, as noted above, bore the brunt of school search activities; this role could be explained, in part, by their employment status and the division of labor at home. They managed the schedules and logistics and were the main worriers about the process; this involvement caused stress and came and some expense to their own work lives. They engaged their Mom-networks, at preschools and on the playground, to gather information about the choice process and about schools.

Preschools played a particularly important role in providing information to mothers about their

children and about their own preferences. Finally, for these (mostly) middle class, educated

women, school choice interacted with their own lives in complex ways: they thought about how

their own work lives might shift as their children went back to school; they negotiated school

choice with their other family priorities, such as owning a home, and they thoughtfully weighed

competing values. These parents also seemed to be thinking about schools and school choice as a

mechanism for the "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 2003, p. 3) of their children and a means of

advancing family status. They did also, however, think critically about the way their individual

choices had meaning for others and an impact on the community of children at large.

In the next chapter, I describe the research problem in more detail – the ways in which

rational choice theory too narrowly describes and explains school choosing and how that limits

our understanding of choice policy and constrains research in the field. In Chapter 2, I also set

forth the research framework undergirding the study's approach and methods. Chapter 3

provides background information on the City of Seattle, Seattle Public Schools' assignment

policies, and the ways in which those have been shaped by racially segregated housing patterns.

In Chapter 4, I describe the study methodology: the interview recruitment and process as well as

the survey creation, sample, recruitment, and analysis. I describe the interview findings as they

relate to school choice activities, parents' school preferences, and information finding in Chapter

5. In Chapter 6, I detail the interview findings related to the interplay between women's and

families' lives and the school-choosing process. That chapter also introduces findings on value

tensions and the role of class in shaping choice behavior. In Chapter 7, I present the findings of a

survey about school choice activities, attitudes, and preferences given during the school choice

process, and in Chapter 8, I discuss the interview and survey findings jointly, explore the ways

the findings build on previous work, and make suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review and Conceptual Frame

School choice is both a widely used and hotly debated educational reform. School choice initiatives—such as charter schools and intra-district choice—take many forms but have at their core a similar ideology and theory of action. Instead of using traditional governance mechanisms of elected school boards, these reforms move accountability for public schools to the individual consumer. Proponents see putting choice in the hands of the parent-customer as a way of improving academic efficiency, outcomes, equity, and innovation (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Greene & Loveless, 2010; Hill, 1996; Hill, 2000; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000; Walberg, 2007). Opponents, on the other hand, fear choice will undermine public education by exacerbating existing inequities (Henig, 1994; Lee, Croninger, & Smith, 1996) and increasing separation of students by race, class, and cultural background (Fuller & Elmore, 1996; Henig, 1994; Weiher & Tedin, 2002). Whichever side of the debate one takes, parents are at the heart of school choice as a reform. Understanding how and why parents choose is essential to understanding the way school choice reforms will be (and are) operating as an educational initiative.

In this chapter, I briefly examine the history and underpinnings of school choice theory to illuminate the ways parents and parental rights are part of the political and theoretical argument for school choice. I also analyze gaps in school choice research and methodology and set forth the theoretical frame that guided the data collection and analysis for this study.

School Choice History and Rational Choice Theory

School choice theory was first put forth in 1955 by Friedman, who has been credited with being the father of voucher reform in education. In his article, *The Role of Government in Education* (1955), he proposed separating the financing of schools from the governing of

schools. Using the language and rationale of neoclassical economic theory, Friedman suggested

that an education system based on vouchers would minimize inefficient government spending

while giving the children of low-income parents, who are traditionally stuck in the very worst

public schools, a better chance at receiving a good education. In education as in other fields, he

argued, "competitive private enterprise is likely to be far more efficient in meeting consumer

demands than either nationalized enterprises or enterprises run to serve other purposes" (1955,

para. 14).

Following the publication of Friedman's landmark article, Chubb and Moe authored the

next most influential text in market-based reform: *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*

(1990). The governance and structure of the public school system, Chubb and Moe argued,

"constrains and aggregates" (p. 21) individual choices in such a way that the organizations

within this larger system – schools – are doomed to failure. Private schools, on the other hand,

operate under a very different institutional conditions." The conditions of autonomy and clarity

of focus aggregate individual parent choices in ways that prove more beneficial to educational

outcomes. Chubb and Moe used a wide variety of test score data to support their claim that

private schools are more efficient and productive than public schools. Academic outcome

measures for private school students are also better than for students who attend public schools.

Finally, a large body of work in the libertarian tradition has argued for privatization based

on the importance of upholding parental rights and preferences of individuals. Similar to Chubb

and Moe, libertarians have argued that the aggregation of individuals' choices creates a viable

and effective system for all. Education and public policy researchers such as Hill (2000) and

Hess (2003) made the parent as choice-maker, and the pursuit of private interests, the centerpiece

in the argument for market reform. Hill, for example, argued that the most pragmatic way of

understanding the "public" purposes of education (as opposed to the private benefits derived from education) is as the sum of the interests of individual citizens and rejects the idea of a transcendent general will (2000). The education market then will be vital and healthy because informed parents will make rational choices to drive competition as they seek school options in the best interest of their children.

The language of choice also informed the conversation and landscape of desegregation. After *Brown v. Board of Education*, the "southern segregationists interpreted the Supreme Court decision as requiring nothing more than choice for black students to transfer between two racially separate systems of schooling" (Fuller & Elmore, 1996, p. 5). By the 1970s magnet schools and new voucher programs arose in more cities as a way of addressing desegregation, white-flight, and educational equity (Fuller & Elmore, 1996; Levin & Belfield, 2003; Wilson, 2010). Magnet schools served to attract students from across a district in order to "achieve racially balanced schools" (Teske, Schneider, & Marschall, 2000, p. 23).

Another form of choice used to address the need for racial balance is intra-district choice. In these types of choice programs, parents have the option to choose any school in the district but the district regulates the choice to racially or demographically balance the schools. This type of plan was used in Seattle from 1998–2007, prior to this study. Currently Seattle uses an option-demand choice system, the most widespread type of choice system in the United States (Teske, Schneider, & Marschall, 2000). In option demand, parents first opt out of their neighborhood school and then select from the alternatives provided by the school district.

Another widespread form of choice is charter schools. By 2014 charter schools were approved in 42 states, including, as of 2012, Washington State. Charters, which are free from the bureaucratic constraints of public schools, are touted by their supporters as being centers of

innovation in education. Supporters also argue that they provide flexible ways to meet the needs

of underserved populations (Walberg, 2007). Opponents believe that certain types of parents

seek out charters, and that charters thereby "cream skim" from the districts in which they are

located taking the most advantaged and high performing students out of the district (Hoxby,

2001; Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser & Henig, 2002). The presence of charters is also

thought to put market pressure on traditional public schools and increase academic performance

(Payne & Knowles, 2009; Walberg, 2007). While they remain politically popular, charters have

demonstrated mixed results in increasing student achievement (Center for Research on Education

Outcomes, 2014; Chingos & West, 2014).

The history, types of school choice, and arguments of their proponents provide an

overview of some of the ways parental choosing is used as a lynch pin – both ideologically and

theoretically – to build the case for choice-based reform. The theoretical frame for these

arguments whereby individual choosers drive education reform is rational choice theory.

Rational choice theory operates on three core constructs: preferences, constraints, and utility

maximization (Opp, 1999). Becker, whose texts *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*

(1976) and his follow-on *A Treatise on the Family* (1981) serve as foundational work for the

economic understanding of choice making, described the "economic approach" to behavior this

way: "all human behavior can be viewed as involving participants who maximize their utility

from a stable set of preferences and accumulate an optimal amount of information and other

inputs in a variety of markets…the economic approach provides a unified framework for

understanding behavior" (Becker, 1976, p. 14). Using this theoretical approach, most school

choice researchers attempt to understand that "stable set" of parental preferences about schools

and the way parents accumulate "an optimal amount of information."

Parental Preferences and School Choice Research

>   Choice, as a policy strategy for school improvement, depends on an
>
>   interconnected series of assumptions about behavior: Parents choose schools that
>
>   meet their preferences, schools adapt to the interests of families, and parents, in
>
>   turn, become more invested in the schools they have chosen. In effect, interests
>
>   and preferences of parents – and how these preferences are revealed in choices –
>
>   play a critical role in the success of school choice policies. (Wilson, 2010, p. 17)

Wilson's words illustrate the application of rational choice theory to school choice and the

"critical role" of parents in choice-based systems. Rational choice theory is posited to explain

how micro-level behaviors of parents will lead to macro-level changes in schools: In a choice-

based system, a market is created that requires schools to respond to individual parental choices

if they hope to attract families and students. School choice theory suggests the market will do a

better job than the current model of elected school boards and public accountability mechanisms

of ensuring high-quality schools because 1) school owners have an incentive to please the

clientele; 2) parents and children have the right to exit if there is not a match between what

parents and students want and the kind of education they receive; and 3) schools that do a better

job of satisfying consumers will be more likely to prosper and proliferate (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

A long line of inquiry into parental choice making has tried to determine what exactly

parents want from schools and what characteristics and information drive their choices. This

section examines the literature and research on parental preferences, starting with some of the

"traditional" survey-based research framed by rational choice theory and then describes some of

the ways researchers have sought to expand or move beyond rational choice theory to understand

the process of choosing. The section closes with a brief overview of research on parental

information seeking, an important component of the school choice process.

Traditional **research on parental preferences.** The bulk of research on parental

preferences is based on large-scale surveys. For the most part, these studies have indicated that

parents prefer academic programs and that high-quality schooling motivates their choices

(Goldring & Rowley, 2006; Schneider & Buckley, 2002;Teske & Schneider, 2001; Weiher &

Tedin, 2002). According to Teske and Schneider (2001), "almost all studies of public school

choice find that most parents say that academic programs and high performance motivate their

choices" (p. 613). In their meta-analysis (2001) of research on parental preferences, they

described myriad studies of choice systems in various cities that pointed to parental preference

for academic quality: from inter-district choice in Massachusetts to magnet schools in Cincinnati

to a voucher program in San Antonio. In all of these studies, parents expressed a preference for

high academic quality.

Researchers and policy makers are concerned that parents of different races and classes

might have differing preferences. Policy makers worry that these differences in preferences

might lead to schooling choices that increase segregation or exacerbate existing education

inequities (Butler, Carr, Toma, & Zimmer, 2013; Cooper, 2005). The results of these studies

have been mixed. Most survey-based studies have shown that race and class make no difference

in parents' expressed preferences for high performing schools (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall,

2000; Teske & Schneider, 2001).

However, despite the preponderance of evidence that parents of all races and classes, in

surveys, express similar interest in high-quality academic programs, there is growing awareness

that expressed preferences measured by surveys are not necessarily the same as those that get

actualized in choice behavior (Bell, 2005, 2008; Burgess, Greaves, Vignoles, & Wilson, 2009;

Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000; Stein, Goldring, & Cravens, 2010; Teske & Schneider,

2001). So while preferences such as religion, school racial composition, extra-curricular

activities, and class size have not been shown, in surveys, to drive parent choice, there is

evidence that these issues might drive behavior (Bell, 2005, 2008; Elacqua, 2005; Schneider &

Buckley, 2000; Teske & Schneider, 2001; Weiher & Tedin, 2002) For example, Weiher and

Tedin (2002) found that despite their stated preferences for test scores, parents transferred their

children into lower-performing schools; and that while no parents cited race as being a factor in

choosing a school, parents were likely to transfer their children into schools with children of the

same race. Teske and Schneider also reported a mis-match between parents' expressed

preferences and their behavior: "higher-SES parents and white parents appear more likely to

favor schools with fewer low-income students or minorities. Expanded choice systems therefore

could exacerbate stratification or segregation because different types of parents systematically

make different choices" (2001, p. 614). In his analysis of parental choice behavior in Santiago,

Chile, Elacqua similarly found that parent decisions were influenced more by the demographics

of a school than its academic performance. He concluded that "relying on survey data to better

understand parental preferences can lead to an overly optimistic conclusion" about choice

motivations (2005, p, 22).

   Thickened **research on parental preferences.** In order to address these "overly

optimistic" conclusions, researchers such as Bell (2005, 2008), Wilson (2010) and others have

tried to look inside the black box of parental choosing by questioning the constructs of the

surveys, using different methodological approaches to examine parent preferences and behaviors,

and examining aspects of choosing deemed *exogenous* to rational choice theory. *Exogenity* is the

term used for those elements of choosing theorized to be outside the rational choice model.

     ***Academic quality*.** One problematic element of the survey-based line of inquiry is that the

construct of *academic quality* is ambiguously defined or not defined at all. Perhaps each parental

chooser has a unique definition or standard of academic quality and issues like racial

composition and extracurriculars are indeed components of academic quality for some parents

(Stein, Goldring, & Cravens, 2009; Wilson, 2010). In her research on parents choosing schools

in Seattle during the era of intra-district choice, Calvo (2007) found that parents do not have

> a uniform idea of what academic quality means. Some parents think it means high
>
> test scores, others want a solid foundation for college (not necessarily represented
>
> by high average school test scores). Some believe in process-based learning,
>
> while others want their children drilled in skills using a traditional format. Some
>
> are driven to seek out the "best" school, while others believe that children can get
>
> a good education anywhere as long as they are motivated and the parents are
>
> involved. Even among the most committed and involved parents, there is a wide
>
> range of opinion about what academic quality means. (pp. 33–34)

Stein, Goldring, and Cravens (2009), in their study of 2,943 parents with children enrolled in 15

Indianapolis charter schools, noted that espoused parental preferences for academic quality were

not reflected in their behavior. Academic quality did not always drive the parents' choice to

change schools. Based on this result, the authors expressed concern with the "construct validity"

of academic quality in previous survey research:

> While parents often cite academics or academic quality as the main driver of their
>
> choice of a charter school, what is meant by "academics" or "academic quality"

varies across studies. Such variations highlight the need to explore these terms in

order to know whether parents are speaking about performance on standardized

tests, particular curricula and pedagogies, the overall reputation of the school, or

something else when they refer to a school's academic quality. (2009, p. 2)

Retrospective preferences. Along with the construct validity of academic quality, the

retrospective nature of surveys has raised methodological concerns. Bell (2008) has taken this

issue on in her research, claiming that

previous work relies almost solely on retrospective interviews and questionnaires

of parents after they have already [chosen a school]. Although these data shed

descriptive light on important issues they do not allow researchers to explore and

understand the dynamic, situated aspects of parental reasoning…the problems

with self-report data and memory have long been a topic of discussion among

both social science research and biographers. (p. 123).

She has argued for eliminating the hindsight bias inherent in retrospective questioning to

uncover the social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape preference and have not

previously been accounted. Bell's work, in particular, has helped lead to a "thickening"

of rational choice theory (Wilson, 2010, p. 45). She was among the first researchers in the

United States to suggest that the lack of investigation into "why parents have the

preferences they do" was theoretically problematic, arguing that the research that forms

the backbone of the choice literature largely treats the choice process as a black box,

whose internal workings remain a mystery" (Bell, 2005, p. 6).

Complex, contextual, and process oriented preferences. Using related scholarship on

parental involvement in schools, she theorized that race, social class, and immigration status –

rather than being exogenous to school choice as rational choice theory would suggest – are

central to it. Methodologically, this led her to engage in interviews with parents *during* the

search process in order to understand the ways in which their context and positionality interacted

with that process. In so doing, Bell advanced school choice research away from the thin

"empirical and conceptual understanding of choice" posited by rational choice theory and

towards methods and concepts "more reflective of the complex phenomenon under

investigation" (2008, p. 144). Some of the ways she has attempted to thicken the conception of

parental school choice and open the black box of school choice are important guideposts for this

study.

First, while rational choice theory presumes preferences are stable, Bell's study of 36

families choosing middle and high schools in a large, Midwestern city found that preferences do

indeed change over time, through interactions during the school choice process, and because of

developments related to the policies and procedures of choosing (2008). Second, in that same

and subsequent studies, Bell's research demonstrated the ways a parent's interaction with his or

her children's current school shaped his or her thinking about school choice as well as his or her

access to school choosing resources and networks. In short, her work shows that:

> preferences shift, change, and interact. They are not the independent,
>
> disconnected, unsocialized, ahistorical constructs our models presume. Further,
>
> parents of different social class backgrounds do not have similar resources to
>
> interpret and mediate school interactions that shape preferences. (2008, p. 144)

Problematizing *Parents* and *the Family* in Research on Preferences

Bell's work identified and addressed important gaps in traditional school choice research

by naming and examining ways in which issues thought to be exogenous to school choice

actually play a major role in parental thinking and behavior. Another major gap in the research on parental choice making is the un-differentiated, or un-defined, notion of the *chooser*. In school choice theory, the family unit, acting with or on behalf of a student, is hypothesized to be the rationally acting, utility-maximizing body. Most literature on school choice assumes the "parents" or the "family" as the chooser. Take the following titles, for example: *Education by Choice: The Case for Family Control*; *Theory and Practice of Family Choice in Education*; *Parent Information for School Choice: The Case of Massachusetts*. The family as a unit is therefore assumed to be acting on a shared set of preferences. In the economic language of rational choice theory, the family or the household has a single utility function (Vermeullen, 2000), which "assumes that each household pursues one overarching collective goal that reflects a common set of interests" (Wolf, 1992, p. 14).

This unitary approach to the family has been widely criticized (Blair-Loy, 2003; England & Kilbourne, 1990; Fox & Murry, 2000; Qualls, 1987; Wolf, 1992; Vermuellen, 2000) in different fields. Wolf, in her book *Factory Daughters*, describes some of the criticisms: it "completely ignores intrahousehold conflict"; the household is treated as a "living, animate object with a life, logic, and interests of its own"; and the individual is subsumed within it (1992, p. 14). Vermuellen, in his explication of the collective model of the household, describes the unitary model "an empirical straight jacket" for the way it restricts empirical understanding about the family as a "micro society" and in so doing confounds policy and policy makers (Vermuellen, 2000). This unitary conception of the family does not allow room for the possibility that family members have competing preferences; engage in mediation or negotiation in decision-making; or that there any inequities (of power or resource) between individuals in the family (Vermeulen, 2002).

In applying these criticisms specifically to school choice, it's easy to see the ways in which the un-differentiated household model restricts a full understanding of the way the policy of choice plays out: to better understand school choice making, researchers need to understand the role of individuals within the family as well as the interplay between those individuals, and the way in which their preferences lead to actual choice making behavior. If the school is too expensive, will a stay-at-home mother choose to go back to work so the family can afford it? Will the father take a second job? If the best school is far away, will a mother cut back her hours at work so she can drive her son there? How will she weigh the choice of school with her own interests and self-definition, her own education and resources and those of her family?

Only one study seems to have explicitly looked at the family dynamics of school choice: Reay and Ball's "'Making Their Minds up': The Family Dynamics of Choice." These authors focused primarily on the differing ways children are involved (or not) in school choice in working-class versus middle-class families. However, they noted the heavy involvement of women in the work of school choice: "A majority of mothers across the sample talked in terms of being the parent responsible for collecting information, talking to children and organising and making visits to secondary schools" (1998, p. 442). While recognizing the differing roles within the family is a starting point for understanding intra-family dynamics in school choice, more theoretical and empirical work needs to look closely at how families negotiate school choosing.

Gender as a Necessary Construct in School Choice and Preferences

As Reay and Ball (1998) pointed out, gender is salient to the family dynamic of school choice. Gender, however, is also an area of empirical inquiry that has been mostly left out of school choice research.   More generally, feminists are critical about rational choice theory's approach to gender (Blair-Loy, 2003; Brines, 1994; England & Kilbourne, 1990; McQuillan,

2008; Wolf, 1992). Feminists criticize the rational choice approach as failing not only to recognize some of the salient ways in which families operate and interact with other constructs and institutions, but also to accurately predict intra-household behavior based on rational choice modeling (Blair-Loy, 2003; England & Farkas, 1986; MacDonald, 1995; Moen & Wethington, 1992; Wolf, 1992). In the case of the division of labor, for example, the rational choice model fails to predict a husband's lack of participation in housework when the wife has greater earning potential (Blair-Loy, 2003; Brines, 1994; England & Farkas, 1986). Martha MacDonald, a feminist economist, notes that the household has been a "key theoretical focus" for feminists. She contends that "the minimum requirement is a model of the household that allows for conflict of interests and patriarchal power relations within and outside the family (1995, p. 167).

Along with Reay only a few other researchers, mostly in the United Kingdom, have identified gender, the household, and domestic roles as a salient constructs in school choosing. In her work on African American mothers and school choice, Cooper (2005) used the notion of positionality to explore how a chooser's gender, race, and class shape the school choice process. She argued that *positioned* choices are emotional, value-laden, and culturally relevant. They are also informed by how parents are politically situated within greater society and the educational structure (Cooper; 2005, p. 175). This notion of a positioned choice—one shaped by the context, culture, history, and broader social structures of which one is a part—contrasts with the objective rationality assumed by rational choice theory. Like Bell, Cooper explored components of choice deemed exogenous to the model.

David, Reay and Ribbens used research on family-school involvement, generally, which revealed that women have the primary responsibility for school activities (David, et, al, 1994;

Ribbens, 1994; David, 1997; Cooper, 2007; Brantlinger, 2003; Reay, 1998) to scaffold their

studies about the role of mothers in school choosing, specifically. As Reay described,

> Despite the undifferentiated notion of "parent" still to be found in much of the
>
> literature on home-school relationships, when the day-to-day involvement of
>
> parents in children's schooling is examined, it is primarily mothers who are to be
>
> found taking the main responsibility for, and undertaking the majority of, the
>
> work of parental involvement. (1998, p. 197)

David, a British researcher, is a leader in research one women and school choice. In her book

Mother's Intuition, a study on secondary school choice making in London, she found that among

her participants, 46% of secondary school choices were being made by the mother alone, and

only 14% of the school decisions did not include the mother at all (1994). Similarly, Ribbens in a

qualitative study with a smaller sample noted the participation rates of mothers in primary school

choice were even higher (1993). Their work is addressed here to note the ways gender has

helped to build thicker notions of school choice, but it is described in detail in the conceptual

frame section of this chapter.

Beyond Rational Choice Theory

These thickened notions of choice begin to move school-choice theory beyond the

conceptual frame of rational choice. Many feminists have criticized not just the approach to

gender within rational choice theory but the very basis of rational choice theory. England and

Kilbourne, for example, have confronted rational choice theory as failing to recognize major

epistemological concerns of feminism. Their argument is centered on rational choice theory's

methodological individualism and the separative way in which individuals are theorized as

making decisions. They have claimed it is an "inaccurate model" of social arrangements, which

claims "to be completely generic" (England & Kilbourne, 1990, p. 160), not recognizing or valuing more collective decision-making, for example. They, along with other feminists, contended that notions of a "separative self" have given way to an empirical view of human behavior in which autonomy and productivity are viewed as normative and connectedness and reproduction are seen as both feminine and outside the public sphere (England & Kilbourne, 1990; Ribbens, 1993; Roland Martin, 1987). This false dichotomization of separative/connected, reason/emotion, and public/private is at the heart of feminist epistemological concerns about how not only the family is viewed but how social interactions in general are viewed.

Notions of this public/private dichotomy are also at the heart of the school choice debate. How people view school choice, ideologically, stems in part from the way they understand the purposes of schooling: whether they see school as a private good, primarily for the individual to promote social mobility or a public good, primarily for building democratic equality (Henig, 1994; Labaree,1997). While that literature is not part of the conceptualization of this study, per se, the scrutiny applied to school-choice theory is. Education philosopher Terri Wilson has noted that "the very rationale of choice – that parents, with stable preferences, choose schools, and these schools will improve in order to attract more families – incorporates a naïve view of the way that social forces structure human behavior" (2010, p. 57).

In Wilson's case study of (mostly) mothers looking at and considering two culturally distinctive charter schools, one a Somali school and the other a German-language immersion in St. Paul, Minnesota, she extended the conceptual boundaries of school choice making into the arena of moral and ethical judgments. Her research examined the ways in which school choice raises values tensions and normative questions about the nature of schooling. Choosing, she argued, "compels parents to understand the moral, ethical, and political landscape of choosing"

(2010, p. 225). Despite this, the dilemmas parents wrestle with are often invisible in research and policy conversations about choice: "The dilemma of choosing is important, not just the outcome of choice. Moreover, focusing on the dilemma helps us understand the ways choosing involves complex moral negotiations. These pieces of choice are often implicit and invisible parts of parents' decisions" (Wilson, 2010, p. 225).

This section has described the evolving nature of research on parental preferences in school choice. While rational choice theory construes school choice as a relatively narrow model based on stable preferences and objective decision making by parents, researchers have expanded that notion by revealing how parents are positioned as choosers in social, cultural, and political contexts and demonstrated that preferences are shaped by these contexts. Preferences have also been shown to be shifting and complex. Finally, some researchers and philosophers have questioned the very basis of rational choice theory and questioned the limitations it places on our understanding of human behavior, including behaviors related to school choice.

Parental Information Seeking

As detailed above, researchers have given parental preferences in school choosing a good deal of treatment due to its importance in school-choice theory. School-choice inquiry has also addressed the ways in which parents seek information and what information they have access to as they strive to find a school that meets their preferences (Goldring & Rowley,2006; Teske & Schneider, 2001; Schneider, Teske & Marschall, 2000; Weiher & Tedin, 2002): "Without quality information on school options, parents cannot be expected to make the most reasoned decisions on behalf of their children, both in terms of academic quality and programmatic fit" (Lubienski, 2008, p. 101).

Because parents must have access to similar information about schools in order to identify them as high quality or not, this vein of empirical work examines where that information comes from, what channels and activities it is gathered through, who gathers the information, and how it is utilized. As with preferences, "critics argue that the benefits of choice will be unequally distributed across the population because of differential ability to gather and process information about schools" (Schneider, Teske, Roch, & Marschall, 1997, p. 1203). This section briefly looks at parental information seeking in three ways: types and quality of available information, the use of networks for information seeking, and ways the search for school information differs by class and educational level of the parent.

Types of Information: formal and informal. School information is generally classified in two categories: formal and informal (Lubienski, 2008; Schneider, Teske & Marschall, 2000). Formal information is published by a school, school district, or an outside entity that aggregates school information. These data typically include test scores, demographic information, school mission and philosophy, survey data, and teacher qualifications. In the era of testing and No Child Left Behind, this type of quantitative data has become more widely available (Bell, 2008). Informal information is, like it sounds, information collected through conversation, "word of mouth," and other channels, like social media, that are not sanctioned by schools or districts.

Research suggests that while school and district-based sources of information are easy for all parents to collect, they carry little actual value to the end user (Lubienski, 2008; Schneider, Teske & Marschall, 2000) and have "little useful information about individual school performance" (Schneider, Teske & Marschall, 2000, p. 115). Higher-educated and higher socio-economic parents are even less likely than others to find formal sources of information useful (Schneider, Teske & Marschall, 2000).

Informal forms of communication – word of mouth, for example – appear to be the most common way parents find information about schools (Goldring & Rowley, 2006; Teske & Schneider, 2001,). This importance of informal communication gives rise to questions about whom parents are talking to and what types of exchanges they are having about schools. Research on parental networks has aimed to answer those questions. Research has shown that parental networks are highly segregated by race and class and that reliance on networks for educational information has differential effects on different races, classes, and levels of educational attainment: "parents are embedded in networks of information that are highly stratified by education: highly educated individuals are likely to talk about schools with other highly educated individuals and less-educated individuals are likely to talk about schools with other less-educated individuals" (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000, p. 115). Further, race plays a major role in whom parents turn to for conversations about schools: Blacks speak mostly to Blacks, Hispanics to Hispanics, and Whites to Whites (Schneider et al., 1997).

In short, parents, in general, rely more on informal types of information than formal, with higher-income families relying even less than others on formal information. The exchange of informal information happens through parental networks, which are highly stratified by race, class, and education level.

Conceptual Frame

This study's conceptual frame was built with the thickened notions of school choice theory described in the literature review above. Specifically, the framework evolved from Bell's recognition of both the methodological shortcomings of retrospective work and school choice as a process; and from Cooper's, David's, and Reay's recognition of the importance of positionality in choice making. From there, the study used feminist methods and feminist concepts.

Methodologically and conceptually women were positioned at the center of the study, and their

school choice activities were viewed in the context of their family, their neighborhood, and the

broader social conditions of which they were a part. As such, the guiding concepts discussed

below are drawn from school-choice literature as well as women's choosing in other fields like

maternal-infant care, career-family balance, and intra-family decision making.

Feminist Methods

There are three particular ways the methods valued women's contributions and pursued a line of

empirical inquiry that was gender-aware.

     Interview sample and methods. The first was by initially selecting an interview sample

of only women and choosing interview methods tested by others researching mothers and school

choice. As discussed above, most school choice literature uses the terms *family* and *parents*

liberally while revealing in the appendices that the subjects were mostly women. The studies of

Brantlinger, David, Ribbens, Cooper, and Reay served as methodological guides. Brantlinger, in

her book *Dividing Classes*, noticed and addressed that – despite her intention to study parents –

she talked primarily to women for her research: "My intent was to include either or both parents;

however, mothers usually answered the telephone and agreed to participate. The few fathers who

answered promptly turned the phone over to their wives. Interviewing only women was

unintentional" (2003, p. 32). Upon noticing this pattern, Brantlinger realized that who

participated in the interviews actually mattered to her research and allowed her to think about the

ways in which social class – her primary interest – intersects with gender in some important

ways. Her ability to identify that "concern with children, schooling, and family status are the

domain of women" and "it is mothers who negotiate with schools regarding children" (p.33)

added strength to her study.

David, Ribbens, and Reay, as described above – in their work in the UK – have also all been explicit about understanding women's experience in schools and in the educational market place. Reay conducted a study with 33 women whose children were enrolled in two "socially contrasting primary schools" in inner London (1998, p. 198). Using in-depth interviews, she explored the women's relationship to their child's schooling, including their role in school choosing. In their study of 80 families in London, David, West, and Ribbens (1994) used mixed methodologies to examine the process of familial choosing, acting, in part, out of "surprise that despite the massive numbers of particular research studies on parental choice, none had thought to 'problematize' the concept of parent in terms of gender, race, ethnicity or family context" (1994, p. 6). While they were open to interviewing mothers, fathers, or other caretakers (because they wanted to understand the different dynamics within choosing families), they ended up interviewing mothers 86% of the time, which was as they expected "given that it is well-known that they have the main family responsibilities for schooling and education (David, 1993) and also that they are generally the interviewees in research studies in relation to children" (p. 34).

The only U.S. study found in this review that frames research on parental choosing around gender is Cooper's study (2007) of African American mothers: "School choice as 'motherwork': valuing African-American women's educational advocacy and resistance." She used a feminist interpretive approach in her interviews of 14 urban, low-income or working class African-America mothers (or other mothers – alternate female caregivers) with children enrolled in either public, charter, private or Catholic school. Her methods "allowed mothers to define how they make meaning of their educational

view, choice and experience, and how these are shaped by socioeconomic and cultural

factors" (p. 497).

      Intra-family dynamics. The second feminist methodological approach I took was to

recognize the importance of intra-family dynamics. Women's schooling choices for their

children are made and enacted in the context of the nuclear or extended family. As discussed in

the literature review above, a unitary approach to the family can constrain empirical work but

determining a particular methodological and conceptual frame for looking at the family is a

conundrum for researchers:

> Researchers are aware that individuals, not families, make decisions. Yet family
>
> strategies represent more than just the sum of decisions of individual family
>
> members, reflecting at least tacit agreements among them…Exactly how
>
> conflicting strategies can coalesce into a "family" strategy – or even how family
>
> members with different goals achieve a consensus – is mostly uncharted territory.
>
> (Moen & Wethington, 1992, p. 235)

      Some feminists, in trying to address the patriarchal-focused nature of pervious empirical

work on the family, have espoused explicitly looking at women as individuals within the family

to ensure that their status and experiences are not defined by the males in the family or obscured

(Acker, 1973, p. 938). Others, including Curtis, have preferred to view the family as a whole unit

inside of which various types of social and economic exchanges take place (1986, p. 176). As

such, he emphasized the importance of recognizing both the individuals within the family while

also recognizing them as embedded or "organized" within households. This study took both

approaches: hearing the voices of women while explicitly asking about and recognizing the way

their experience of school choosing interacted with their partners and spouses.

Survey Methods. The third feminist methodological approach concerns explicitly addressing the gender and other biases inherent in previous surveys on school choice (Devault, 1996). I constructed the survey used in this study to both recognize the ways domestic labor was implicated in choosing and to understand the ways men and women might participate differently or have contrasting approaches to school choice, that is, to both value women's experiences with choosing while comparing and contrasting women and men in various aspects of school choosing.

Conceptualizations of Mothering

Building on this explicit methodologically recognition of gender, this study was also informed by concepts from other fields, such as health care, child care, and medicine, in which women's decision-making, in the context of the family, has been seen as relevant to policy-related concerns. The majority of this literature operationalizes woman as mother—mother as the proxy decision maker for her family and child. She receives keen interest as an empirical subject because she is the policy target who has the most influence on the health and well-being of her fetus, infant, and pre-school child. Decision-making literature about mothers distinctly traces the trajectory of her "motherhood": conception and fertility; pregnancy and birth; breast feeding and infant care; and the balancing of maternal employment, child care, and preschool all receive ample treatment, and the research provides a solid framework for investigating the mother's role in schooling choices.

Maternal Preferences and Constraints. Becoming a mother is a time of great change for a woman, and her decision-making with respect to her child is deeply connected to the ways in which she identifies and defines herself as "mother." Often these decision points—childbirth, breastfeeding, re-entry (or not) in the work force—put mothers in the position of mediating

between a belief set about what "mothers" should do and the constraints of her set of circumstances. As such, women communicate feeling morally and structurally "constrained" during decision making (David, Davies, Edwards, Reay, & Standing, 1997; Hertz, 1997; Himmelwitt & Sigala, 2004; Reid et al., 2009; Simopolous & Grave, 1984). Moral constraints stem from "not being the type of mother I want to be" and being unable to match a conception of motherhood with the reality of available choices (Himmelwitt & Sigala, 2004). These internal tensions are created in part by "particular socially gendered moral rationalities'" (Edwards & Duncan, 1996 cited in David et al., 1997, p. 72) and act as constraints on behavior. In a study of mothers balancing work with care of a pre-school child, for example, 60% "explained their decisions by constraints that turned at least in part on personal identities" (Himmelwitt & Sigala, 2004, p. 461).

Structural constraints – like the lack of available child care, part-time work, financial resources, or familial support – are prevalent for mothers as well. Work on childcare and preschool choice has found mothers' choices so constrained by economic conditions, state policies, and domestic and workplace circumstances that they could barely be considered choices (Himmelwitt & Sigala, 2004; Riley & Glass, 2002). David et al. in their research on the choice-making behavior of mothers in England found that mothers felt more constrained by their opportunities for school choices than freed by them (1997). The women's daily work of negotiating choice, addressing educational issues, and managing relationships with school left them "dissatisfied" with their constrained choices (1997, p. 408).

Anxiety and Guilt. Given the moral tensions for mothers of weighing "the type of mother I want to be" with society's expectations for them as mothers and structural constraints of managing the limited viable options, it is not surprising that many choices in motherhood

produce anxiety and guilt. From pregnancy to preschool, literature reveals that guilt and anxiety surround women's choice making. For example, research on pre-natal screenings indicates that women are trying to weigh their own "personal and social aspirations" for having a healthy baby with fears about what a screening could tell them about the health of their baby – producing an asymmetry that provokes anxiety as they try to decide whether or not to have the screening (Reid, Sinclair, Barr, Dobbs & Crealey, 2009). In breast-feeding choices, too, anxiety about societal norms, breast feeding in public, and being able to produce enough milk result in maternal anxiety (Simopulous & Grave, 1984) around the decision to breast or bottle-feed.

     This same notion is picked up in childcare literature, with reference to the moral constraints women feel. A woman's decision to go back to work or stay at home has weighty implications, and women grapple "with the meaning of their employment for child well-being" knowing that they can be "subject to public debate about the appropriateness of employment" in a way fathers rarely are (McQuillan, 2008, p. 479). Career-oriented women and women who have to work often experience guilt because they "have the least options because their work environments remain entrenched in a male trajectory" (Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004, p. 466) – a career path defined without obligations for child rearing and domestic labor. Hertz found that in dual income couples, even those focused on shared parenting, fathers did not express guilt about working full time whereas all women did (1997). School-choosing literature has not picked up issues of guilt and anxiety per se. Some school-choice theorists do touch on the ways choosing puts more pressure on families for children's academic success (Reay and Ball, 1998). These discussions of parents' rights and obligations in a choice system are more philosophical than empirical in nature.

The Intersection of Gender and Class

Beyond the family, this study positioned the maternal chooser in broader social contexts: in this case, the structural constraints created by Seattle's assignment policy and the city's class- and race-based housing patterns. In Seattle, families are reacting to the new policy in which a family's place of residence defines the neighborhood school to which a child is assigned and, in part, defines a family's choice set. From a policy perspective, then, the way a family reacts to its neighborhood school and the policy change will be influenced by the economic and racial composition of the neighborhood where they live as well as the other maternal and family-related decisions and constraints discussed above. Under this new policy, parents do not need to be choosers at all; their children can attend the neighborhood school. Only making a choice to opt out of the neighborhood school and actively investigate other choices makes them choosers. Examining the ways parents view their neighborhood school, academically and demographically, will be important to understanding what makes them choosers in the first place. This may illuminate the point at which the racial and class composition of the neighborhood and schools intersects with some of the notions of maternal identity construction discussed above (and below) and thus provide conceptually rich possibilities for the study of economic stratification through school choice—a long-held concern of many policy makers and researchers.

As noted above, socio-economic status is known to influence choice in a number of ways. Parents of higher socio-economic status are more likely to be choosers and utilize their networks of other more affluent families to collect information on choice, for instance. However, less is known about the intersection of gender and class. Reay and Ball (1998), Cooper (2008), and Bell (2008) all contended that "class, gender and race all contribute significantly to the ways choice is played out within families" (Reay & Ball, 1998, p. 432). One way that is true is through differing

conceptions of childhood based on class. As women are choosing schools, their preferences may

be shaped by what they believe their child needs. A women's understanding of those needs may,

in turn, be shaped by her conception of childhood in general.

      Concerted Cultivation. Brantlinger (2003), Blair-Loy (2003), and Lareau (2003) have

all described the ways in which middle class women are likely to understand childhood,

including its schooling components, as a time when children are fragile and need protection and

cultivation. Lareau terms this approach to childhood concerted cultivation. Concerted cultivation

is a "cultural logic of child rearing" (p. 3) adopted by middle class families in which childhood is

characterized by a "parent [who] actively fosters and assesses a child's talents, opinions, and

skills" (p. 31). She contrasts concerted cultivation with natural growth, which is more typically

adopted by working-class parents and is characterized by "long stretches of leisure time, child-

initiated play, clear boundaries between adults and children, and daily interactions with kin" (p.

3).

      Maternal Identity Construction. A construction of childhood such as concerted

cultivation gives the mother's at-home work more meaning, gives her devotion to home more

"resiliency and tenacity" (Blair-Loy, 2003, p. 80), and allows her to construct her own identity

by attributing a child's achievement "to child rearing" (Brantlinger, 2003, p. 40). Lareau (2003)

and Brantlinger (2003) have examined the ways in which middle-class mothers believe that

advocating for school advantage and ensuring academic success for their children are integral to

being a good mother, and that family caretaking means advancing family status. To the women

in their studies, the concept of being "advantaged" or advancing family status also meant that

others need to be disadvantaged. Both Brantlinger (2003) and Blair-Loy (2003) described how

the women in their studies constructed realities not just by validating their own choices but also

by denigrating the choices of other people. For Blair-Loy's family-committed women,

denigrating others' choices meant believing that working women's children were worse off and

ill-behaved (2003). For the women in Brantlinger's study, denigrating others' choices meant

validating the need for their children to be in particular schools and particular types of classes,

set apart from low-income and working-class children. According to Brantlinger, the women's

"role in maintaining family status is pushing their children and pushing for their children in

schools…being asked to care about other people's children…seemed to threaten their own

child's well-being" (2003, p. 58). Reay has noted that while both working class and middle class

mothers were working in support of their children's schooling and school choices, middle class

mothers were more "heavily investing in terms of time and mental and emotional labour in the

children's education" (1998, p. 198). She has further argued that the move towards market-

based education policy puts a greater weight on middle class women to use schooling to advance

family social status; mothers are the ones who are engaging their networks and capital and doing

the work of "bridging the gap between" family and the classroom and therefore have more to

lose if their efforts are not fruitful (1998, p. 205).

Finally, Ribbens has described how

At the point of entry in to the compulsory education system, the child and her/his mother

have been largely functioning as a unit, often as part of a 'family', a unit for which the

mother has been largely responsible on a daily level, which she has played an important

part in creating, and in which she will have invested a great deal of time and effort and

often a large part of her own identity (1993, p. 88).

Given this connection between mother, child, family and maternal identity, elementary school choice is likely to be a time of a mother re-shaping her role and her own identity in relation to her child and family.

Process and Weighing Multiple Factors

As all of the above indicates, women making choices for their families are considering multiple concerns simultaneously and over time: family needs, personal needs, moral and structural constraints. Work and child care are excellent examples of the ways women's decisions in different domains are inextricably linked: "a mother's employment creates the need for childcare arrangements, and employment decisions hinge on availability and cost of child care" (Folk & Beller, 1993, p. 146). As mothers try to come to terms with "competing devotions," (Blair Loy, 2003, p. 11)—the simultaneous valuing of motherhood and employment— and structural and moral constraints, decision-making looks less like an event and more like a process.

David et al. contended that when choices are viewed less as discreet moments in time and more as a continual balancing of competing values, "the greater involvement of mothers becomes much more evident" (David et al., 1994, p. 125). For example, both parents are likely to initially choose a work-childcare arrangement, but the mother will likely be the one to be make decisions on a daily basis to maintain the balance of that choice. Elementary school choice is a place where a woman's work mediating between family and the outside world and choice-making for herself and family continues (David, et al., 1993). Further, as Bell has noted, school choice itself is not a moment in time, but a process whereby parents, mostly mothers, interact with their child, the schools, and the school choice process over time. Even during the course of the process a mother might change her understanding of a child's needs and re-establish

preferences based on a new-found understanding. Bell described one mother whose son's dramatic change in behavior compelled her to change the school she thought would be best for him (2008). This is the type of ongoing negotiation and intervention mothers enact on an ongoing basis for and with their children and schools (Bell, 2008; David, et al., 1993; David, et al., 1994; Reay, 1998; Ribbens, 1993).

Based on the existing literature on school choice and the central role of the mother in family life, I conceptualized educational preferences and the elementary school choice process as likely to be shaped much like a mother's other choices: intertwined with her own preferences for work inside and outside the family; her construction of identity as a mother; moral and structural constraints, and anxieties over making the best choices for herself and her child. These notions guided the methods and analysis of the study.

CHAPTER 3

SEATTLE: BACKGROUND AND POLICY CONTEXT

Seattle offered a unique setting in which to conduct a study about school choice. Until 2009, the school district utilized an intra-district choice system or voluntary school desegregation plan to address racial imbalances created by segregated housing patterns. In 2007 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled, in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, that this system violated the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment by using a student's race in deciding whom to admit to particular public schools. In 2009–10, Seattle returned to a neighborhood assignment plan, whereby a child's place of residence determines which school(s) he or she attends. However, during the 2010–11 school when this study was conducted, opportunities for choice did exist and many parents remained "on the market" for kindergartens. This chapter provides a brief history of Seattle's school attendance policies and housing patterns and describes the policies in effect at the time of the study.

School Assignment History

In 1978 Seattle was one of the first big U.S. cities to voluntarily implement busing in order to desegregate its schools. During that time about 12,500 of the district's 54,000 students were bussed (Judge, 2007). In 1988, under pressure to decrease bussing's disproportionate burden on students of color (Judge, 2007), the district "modified the system to accommodate some degree of parental choice*"* (Calvo, 2007 p. 20) while still striving for racial balance using clusters. Ten years later, the school board voted to completely end race-based bussing and initiate an open enrollment policy, whereby students could choose to attend any school in the district. If the school was over-subscribed, a series of tiebreakers were used to determine who would attend. The tiebreakers were as follows:

1) All applicants who have a sibling already attending the school are admitted.

2) If the school in question is more than fifteen percentage points above or below the racial makeup of Seattle's high school population, applicants (all of whom indicated that the school was their "first choice") are admitted on the basis of race until the enrollment is brought within the +/- 15% range. This comes to be called the "racial tiebreaker."

3) Applicants whose residences are closest to the school. (Judge, 2007, p. 7)

The "racial tiebreaker" was challenged in court and ultimately deemed unconstitutional. Even before the Supreme Court made a decision, the school board suspended the use of the racial tiebreaker. Then in 2009, on the heels of the Supreme Court ruling, Seattle returned to a neighborhood-based assignment plan for the 2010–11 school year.

2011 School Assignment Policy

The neighborhood assignment policy still allowed for some choosing. An article in a local parenting magazine described the first year of the process this way (Parent Map, 2010):

For the first time this year, current students in grades PreK–11—and those who will be new to the district in fall 2010 and pre-registered before Jan. 15—will get their assignment at the end of February. Under the District's new student assignment plan, students currently enrolled are "grandfathered" through the highest grade of the school they currently attend, providing that services they need are available at that school. Students in the highest grade at their current school (rising from elementary to middle school or middle school to high school) will receive an assignment to their attendance area school, or another school based on availability of services. (Parent Map, 2010, para. 2)

The article further described to parents what to do if they would prefer NOT to attend their

assigned school:

> If the family wants the assignment noted in the February letter, no other action is
>
> needed. If the family wants to apply for a different attendance area school or an
>
> Option school, they may do so during Open Enrollment, March 1–31. Note that
>
> all applications received during this time are processed together at the end of
>
> March. While we encourage families to turn in their forms as soon as they can,
>
> there is NO ADVANTAGE to applying on March 1 vs. March 31. Families who
>
> apply during Open Enrollment will receive their assignment at the end of May.
>
> (Parent Map, 2010, para. 2)

Essentially, any family dissatisfied with its neighborhood school could apply to attend a different

attendance area school or an option school. The option schools, which act like charter or magnet

schools, draw families from throughout the city (or a particular region of the city) attracted by

the school's particular education philosophy. In 2011–12, the second year of this new policy,

there were 7 option schools at the elementary and middle school. The philosophy and approaches

of these schools differ from one another and from the neighborhood schools, some foci include

expeditionary learning, social justice, and the environment.

Another option for families in Seattle Public Schools is the Advanced Learning

Program—labeled Spectrum (for students with cognitive and achievement test scores 85%) and

APP (for students with cognitive test scores above 98% and achievement scores above 95%). In

2011–12 these programs were offered in two elementary schools. While these "gifted" programs

were not available to kindergarten students, they cast a long shadow over the choice process

(described in Chapter 5). Families wondered and worried about whether an APP school or

program would be a good fit and whether to make kindergarten decisions based on moving to an

APP program the following year or whether to choose a kindergarten as if the child will be at the

school K–5 or K–8.

To understand the amount of choosing going on, it helps to know that in the 2011–12

kindergarten class (of which the research subjects' children became a part), 68% of families

attended their neighborhood school. For comparison, prior to the implementation of the new

assignment policy, approximately 40% of children were attending their neighborhood schools.

Of the 32% who attended other public schools, in 2011–12, 21% attended other neighborhood

schools and 11% attended an option school (Seattle Public Schools Website). Some of the

students who attended other neighborhood schools did so because they required special

education or English language learner services that were not available at their neighborhood

schools. This study does not address choosing for students requiring these special services.

In the second year of the new policy implementation, awareness of the opportunities for

choice was uneven—among schools' consumers and among schools themselves. The school

district's official message was that children would go to their neighborhood schools, but the

reality was that those who were displeased with this new policy or with their neighborhood

schools still had some options. Further, the Federal No Child Left Behind Act allowed for

families to make choices if their assigned schools were deemed as failing.

As I conducted the study, the schools seemed to interpret the district policy differently.

While many neighborhood schools still gave tours or open houses, and the district website

indicated that every school would still hold tours, a hold-over from the intra-district choice years

(or possibly because of a principal's awareness that many parents were still "on the market"), not

all did. One school where I had hoped to attend a tour told me that they had offered one tour and no one attended, so they were cancelling the rest of them.

Within market-based theory, these types of structural constraints on choice are salient and yet not necessarily well understood. Most of the work on constraints looks at the barriers to gathering information about schools (Schneider, 2001); neglected are the ways in which parents are either institutionally constrained by the specific rules governing choice in their districts or state (Schneider & Buckely, 2002) or individually because of perceived or objective barriers to acting on preferences and goals. The lack of tours in certain neighborhood schools certainly limited access to information and constrained some families' sense of having choice. While this study did not look at families who did not know there was choice or who were constrained from choosing because of uneven application of or misunderstanding about the new policy, the interview findings did suggest that the rules governing the policy constrained and shaped in various ways the decision-making process.

Housing Patterns

The uneven application of policy by neighborhood was just one of the neighborhood-related issues that arose in Seattle school choice. Another important piece of the school enrollment puzzle was Seattle's racially segregated housing patterns. When the move was made to return to neighborhood schools, the fear was that schools would return to reflect Seattle's segregated housing patterns. Seattle has a long history of segregation. In very general terms, North Seattle—or north of the Ship Canal—is majority white and more affluent, while south of the Ship Canal is more racially and ethnically diverse and less affluent. This pattern is rooted in discriminatory policies and practices by civic leaders and land owners. According to Gregory, as

late as the late 1960s "the ship canal was a special kind of boundary, an unmistakable dividing line between the part of Seattle where anyone might live and the part of Seattle that was off-limits to those whose skin was not white" (2006b, para. 7).

> Even with the use of racial tiebreakers to balance schools after bussing, the ship canal remained a racial dividing line as evidenced by school attendance patterns: In October 2005, whites made up 55.6% of the student population north of the ship canal, and only 30.8% of those to the south, though some individual schools remain highly segregated (such as Rainier Beach and Cleveland, the city's southernmost high schools, which serve nearly 94% and 92% students of color, respectively). (Judge, 2007 p. 5)

In 2010, Seattle was a city of approximately 608,660 people and served 47,008 students in the public schools. The overall population was 70% white, 8% African American, 14% Asian, and 5% mixed race. The median income was $60,665, and 55% of adults over 25 had a college degree (U.S. Census Bureau). The map in Appendix A illustrates how the city was still racially divided: In 2010, the north/central part of the city was strikingly less diverse than the southern part of the city.

Schools did not yet wholly reflect these housing trends in 2010 because many of the students who had chosen to attend schools in other parts of the city (before the policy change) were grandfathered into their schools. Overall the racial make-up of Seattle Public schools in the 2010–11 school year was 44% White, 20% African American, 20% Asian, and 12% Hispanic. Forty percent of the population received free and reduced priced lunch and 67% lived with both parents (Seattle Public Schools website).

Private Schools

None of these demographics accounts for those families who opt out of the public school system in Seattle, which was about 25.5% of the population aged 5–9 years in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau) down from a high of about 30% of the population per the 2000 census. In 2011, Seattle had approximately 57 private schools, of which 21 were parochial schools. They served a total of 12,700 students. Demographic information for these schools was difficult to find; Washington State's Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction's website offered "ethnicity" data that are reported by school by grade. No aggregate data for private schools was available. Examination of the ethnicity data revealed that, in general, the populations of individual private schools were 65–95% white except for a number of parochial schools that served majority Hispanic and/or African American children (OSPI website).

The context of choosing in Seattle in 2010 was shaped by the Seattle Public School's new school assignment policy as well as myriad other factors including Seattle's housing patterns, the history of school assignment, the availability of private and parochial schools, and other school district policies (such as APP and options schools).

CHAPTER 4

METHODS

This study used an embedded mixed methods design—primarily a qualitative approach with supporting quantitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Methodologically, as conceptually, women's voices were in the foreground: interviews were used for the development of grounded theory about how women and families make decisions about schools (Jaeger, 1997) while a survey created a background context for understanding this qualitative work. The survey also generated descriptive data about the policy and demographic landscape and served as triangulation for some of the interview findings.

This chapter reviews the way a feminist research approach informed the methodology. It goes on to present the interview sample, recruitment, and protocols and the survey sample, recruitment, and instrument. Finally, it discusses the analysis of both methods, which was the primary point of methodological "mixing."

Feminist Methods

As detailed in chapter 2, the lens I brought to the mixing of methods was informed by feminist methodological approaches, which aim to "bring women in, that is, to find what has been ignored censored, and suppressed and to reveal both the diversity of actual women's lives and the ideological mechanisms that have made so many of those lives invisible" (Devault, 1996, p. 32). The aim of the methods was not just to hear women's voices but to have a richer accounting of the phenomenon of school choice by doing so. There were three ways the methods were feminist in nature. The first is that the interview sample (initially) was only women and semi-structured interview techniques were used to hear women's experiences with school choice.

Second, as noted in Chapter 2, study of the family has often been looked at as an either/or choice for a unit of analysis: "the individual, with little information on any of the social relations in which the person is embedded; or the household, with artificial limits set on what relations of pooling, sharing, or exchange are recognized" (MacDonald, 1995, p. 170). If we accept that neither of these choices is satisfactory, then as researchers (especially collectors of primary data), we have to come to terms with an optimal way to mediate this dichotomy and operationalize it in research methodology. I took the approach of focusing primarily on the woman as an individual while also being conscious of explicitly asking about the ways women were negotiating choice with their partners so as to situate them in the context of the family.

Lastly, I constructed the survey to both recognize the ways domestic labor was implicated in choosing and to understand the ways men and women might participate differently or have contrasting approaches to school choice, that is, to both value women's experiences with choosing while comparing and contrasting women and men in various aspects of school choosing. As detailed below, I was unable to do that through the survey, so I ultimately included two men in the interview group to have a more robust sense of their views and participation in the process.

A chart detailing the data collection strategies, the research questions they address, and their sample population, timing, and integration are presented in Figure 1. Each data collection method is described in detail below.

Research question: How do first-time kindergarten families make elementary school choices within an option-demand system and how do social factors, particularly gender, shape their decision making?

Research Subquestions:

Gender/Roles: In what ways are family members engaged in school choosing? Do different family members play unique roles in the process and work associated with school choosing?

Family: What is the nature of the family decision-making process? What factors are weighed and debated within the family? How are individual values, preferences, and constraints weighed within the family?

Policy: How is parental decision-making shaped by the assignment plan and attitudes towards it? What structural/policy constraints do parents and families most grapple with during the process?

Method	Sample Frame/Recruitment	Sample	Purpose	Timeline
Interviews	Snowball sample selected for comparison/contrast within categories: family structure, maternal employment, SES; choice sets	8 women	Building theory related to family process/women's role in choice-making behavior	December 2010– March 2011 1x per month

Method	Sample Frame/Recruitment	Sample	Purpose	Timeline
Survey	Attendees of public, private, and parochial school tours and open houses in Seattle. Recruited at tours/fairs.	100 parents	Descriptive/ comparative analysis of "who" is doing choice work, what they are doing, how policy has impacted that; knowledge about policy	Recruitment: January 2011– late February 2011 Survey: March 2011

Figure 1: Mixed Methods Study Research questions and methods

Interview Methods

In the winter of 2011, I interviewed eight women (and two men) over the course of approximately six months. The intent of the interviews was to utilize "the stories of people's lived experiences as a way to shed light on" (Abril, 2007, p. 1) elementary school choosing.

All of the interview subjects were women who were "active" first-time kindergarten choosers. Given the option-demand policy context, kindergarten parents in Seattle could fall into one of three categories, of which "active" choosers were a subset: 1) parents who did not know there were choices beyond their neighborhood school; 2) parents who knew there were choices but had determined their child would be attending the neighborhood school (or being home-schooled), and 3) parents who were actively collecting information about the schooling options for their child. These "astute consumers" (Calvo, 2007, p. 36) offered the best access to the types of decision-making activities and processes I was interested in understanding. By looking only at first-time choosers, I removed the concerns and variables created by having a sibling enrolled at a school. This group offered the most insight into the school choice consumer – the group most important for understanding in relation to the theory. As Calvo suggested in her own study of this group, "in some sense they reflect a best-case scenario for how choice works, an upper bound on what we might expect from school choice systems" (2007, p. 36).

In order to most deeply understand school choosing as a process – not a decision made in one moment in time – I interviewed subjects over the course of the choice process. For most subjects, this meant 4–6 interviews; though for others – who made decisions more quickly – there were as few as two interviews.

Interview Sample. Interview participants were selected through purposive snowball sampling techniques, which allowed for the selection of families who were rich "cases" to "best

illuminate" the research questions (Johnson and Turner, 2003) and also provided contrasting cases (with regard to family make-up and demographics). Framing included socio-economic status, ethnicity, family structure, maternal employment status, neighborhood, and school choice types (i.e., one mother might be choosing between a neighborhood school and an option school whereas another woman might be choosing between a private school and a neighborhood school).

Initially I sent an email to friends, colleagues, and acquaintances that had pre-school aged children, spelling out the study qualifications and asking if they knew anyone who might want to participate. I also asked them to connect me with any networks—parent groups, church groups, or listservs—through which I might be able to recruit participants. Once I connected with the first participants, I asked them about friends or colleagues who might be active choosers, asking specifically for mothers who would provide contrasting cases to those people with whom I had already made contact.

I had been aiming for approximately six women; ultimately, the interview sample included eight mothers (two fathers) who were active, first-time choosers. Given the small sample size, the group of subjects represented as much of a cross-section as possible across the multiple "framing" categories. The exact socio-economic status of most subjects was unknown though one family lived in subsidized housing, just above the poverty line (by self-report). The sample did not include any parents of children with special needs or parents who had to choose a school because of the availability of particular service or supports. I did not intentionally exclude this group from the sample frame, but none of the families with whom I connected had children who were in this category. Table 1 shows demographics of the interview subjects.

Table 1.

Interview Participant Demographic Information

Name*	Marital Status	Neighborhood School FRL	Work Status	Education	Ethnicity	Choice Set	Choice
Netu	M	54% FRL	Stay-home	BA	Indian	Public Option	Option****
Libby Harry**	M	35% FRL	Full time	BA	Caucasian	Public Private Option	Option
Regan AJ**	Partner	38% FRL	In school	High school	Caucasian	Public Private Option Parochial	Private
Susan	M	80% FRL	Full time	MA	Caucasian	Public Private Parochial Option	Non-neighborhood public
Sasha	M	54% FRL	Stay-home	High school	Caucasian	Public Private Option	Wait a year
Helene	M	38% FRL	Part time	MA	Caucasian	Public Private Option	Private
Trina	Same sex Partner	Skyway**	Full time & Student	MA	African-American	Public – out of district Private Option	Neighborhood***
Anna	Divorced	38% FRL	Job Seeking	BA	Caucasian	Public Private Option	Non-neighborhood Public***

Note. FRL = Free and Reduced Lunch, a measure of poverty
*Names have been changed
**The male partners who were also interviewed.
***This family lived in an unincorporated area between Renton and Seattle; while they considered themselves Seattle residents, their neighborhood school was in Renton. They were interested in using an out-of-district waiver process to attend the Seattle Public Schools.
****These families attended schools that were not their first choice of school.

As mentioned above, I interviewed two men towards the end of the choosing process for a few reasons. First, described in more detail below, the survey sample failed to yield enough male respondents for me to do the type of gender-based analysis I had hoped to do through the survey instrument. I thought that talking to a few of the heavily involved partners of the women in the survey would provide some opportunities for comparison. Second, I had hoped to understand intra-family decision making, and talking to partners allowed me to triangulate some of the mothers' descriptions of the familial debates and decision-making process.

Interview process. The interviews, which took place between December 2010 and May 2011, were semi-structured and averaged an hour in length. Subjects were interviewed an average of four times although two were interviewed twice, while one was interviewed six times. The men were interviewed only once after the school choices were made. In between the monthly interviews, the women were asked to track their formal and informal school choice activities and conversations. I asked questions about those activities at each interview. Interviews were guided by structured prompts focusing on 1) responses to school tours and the collection of school-related information; 2) family conversation about schools; 3) conversations with people external to the family; and 4) particular personal tensions, conflicts, or concerns that arose during the course of the process. An interview guide can be found in Appendix B.

I did not offer any incentive for participation in the interviews. I believed women searching for schools might be interested in talking about their experiences, in part, because I have been an active chooser myself. In interviewing women similar to myself, I took a page from Brantlinger (who framed her work based on Bourdieu). In her study of the ways middle-class families pursue advantages in schooling, Brantlinger followed Bourdieu's advice "that

researchers study their own groups" (2003, p. 27). She intentionally turned her "scholarly gaze

upward" to study the middle class, of which she is a part, and the way their behavior shaped

schooling for all kids (2003). While I interviewed women from a range of classes, races, and

education levels, that range was relatively narrow. I was aware that the group of choosers was

likely to be more affluent and educated than non-choosers, and, like Brantlinger, I thought it was

important to hear the voices of that group and understand what their activity on the schooling

market might tell us and what it might mean for the rest of the district. I put myself in the same

general demographic with the interview participants and thus accept that any "critical analyses

may be construed as self-scrutiny" (Brantlinger, 2003, p. 28)

Interviews were taped, transcribed, and imported into the NVIVO software package. The

coding and analysis was done iteratively and is described in more detail below.

Survey Methods

The quantitative findings come from a survey taken by parents who were touring public

and private schools in Seattle in the winter of 2011. The purpose of this survey was to understand

the school-choice process: who is involved and what it entails. The survey instrument was

developed using previously validated items from four questionnaires, including a questionnaire

developed by Schneider (2002) designed to examine parents' wishes for their children's

education and a questionnaire developed by Weiher (2002), which examined whether school

choice leads to racially distinctive schools.

While this survey utilized items from previously validated surveys, it also included newly

created items, which were informed by the qualitative work that preceded this study's conceptual

frame (see Appendix C for the Measurement Matrix).The new questionnaire items were intended

to address some of the epistemological concerns raised in previous surveys and to illuminate

some of the limitations and blind spots in those surveys to the extent that a quantitative instrument can do that.

First, previous surveys on this topic have been administered after a school choice has been made, leaving parents to reflect on a decision-making process that they have every reason to rationalize was a good one. Further, these surveys asked parents to re-construct their thought process, which is problematic especially when, as my interviews demonstrated, families' emotions and opinions about what is important to them fluctuated throughout the process. This survey was given *during* the decision-making process when participants could more readily access their attitudes and behavior regarding school choosing.

Second, survey data have not identified *who* was taking the survey as salient. The chooser was presumed to be the family as a unit, without any recognition – as discussed previously – of intra-family dynamics and varying opinions among family members. Third, while many of these surveys intended to identify if parents used academic quality to choose schools, the notion of academic quality is a nebulous one, as addressed in Chapter 2. This survey differentiated types of academic quality that parents could be looking for in order to better understand what was important to them.

The initial aim of the survey was to describe and compare women's and men's preferences, activities, and attitudes related to school choice. Despite oversampling techniques, not enough men participated in the survey to make this a feasible analysis. The survey was administered online through WebQ, and a printed version of the survey is attached in Appendix D. The survey had 33 questions, of which 11 were for demographic information. Other questions sought to learn more about the respondent's school search activities and preferences. Some of the questions included were as follows:

1) If you had to choose one item from the list below as the school characteristic that is most important to you, which one would it be?
   a. Strong academic program
   b. Very good standardized test scores
   c. Diverse student population
   d. Commitment to fostering a love of learning
   e. Commitment to meeting the learning needs of each child
   f. Good reputation for getting children into high quality middle school or high school
   g. Small class size
2) Who is primarily responsible for the school choice activities for this child (consider tours, applications, enrollment forms, web research)?
   a. I am
   b. My spouse/partner
   c. Both parents/caregivers are equally involved
   d. Other

An information sheet was provided as the first page of the survey as a proxy for consent.

Target population. The target population within Seattle was the same as the interview population: active first-time kindergarten choosers. Active choosers, as noted above, provide the best opportunity for addressing the research questions. At the time of the study, I estimated the target population to about 1950 families. First, regarding the number of active first-time kindergarten choosers, I used the numbers from the 2010–11 OSPI data. In October of 2010, there were 4400 SPS kindergartners and 1300 kindergartners in private schools in Seattle. From there, my calculations included these assumptions:

- Two thirds of the private school kindergartners live in Seattle, which means about 900 private school kindergartners are in the target population. The other third live outside of the Seattle School District.

- About half of those kindergartners are siblings, which leaves 450 first-time kindergarten families in private schools.

- About half of the Seattle Public Schools kindergartners are siblings, leaving 2200 first-time choosers.

- Of those 2200, I figured about two thirds were active choosers (which I think was a very generous estimate), leaving about 1500 active, public school, first time choosers.

- Based on 1500 public school families and 450 private school families, 1950 families were in the target population.

Those numbers were estimates at the time. Since then SPS has begun publishing much more detailed enrollment data, and I was able to look up the exact number of open enrollment forms submitted in 2011. The number was 1530 (Seattle Public Schools website). That means 1530 families exercised their right to enter the lottery for a school other than their neighborhood school. Siblings were grandfathered in to their older siblings' schools, so the majority of those opting for open enrollment were likely not siblings.

I have not been able to verify the private school numbers, but based on the accuracy of the public school assumptions, I feel relatively safe in saying that the estimate of a target population of 1950 was valid. I aimed to survey 100 subjects from the target population of first-time active choosers. Ultimately I had 70 valid surveys.

Sample Frame and Recruitment. The sample frame was attendees at private, public, and option school tours in the winter of 2011. These tours provided the best access to active choosers. Since Seattle had just switched to the neighborhood system from intra-district choice, I was aware that this sampling technique would produce a more affluent and educated sample than the general population of kindergarten families. For that reason, I over-sampled schools that served populations with a lower socio-economic status.

The survey sample was intended to be a stratified cluster sample (Groves et al., 2004). To identify which specific schools/neighborhoods I would recruit survey participants from, I created a mapping framework identifying all of the public, parochial/religious, independent, and option schools within each of the school district's geographically drawn middle-school clusters and categorized them based on socio economic status (SES) (Elaqua, 2005). I sampled from 4 of the 9 clusters: one high SES, one mid-SES, and two low SES. Within each cluster frame, I intended to randomly choose two public, one independent, one alternative/option, and one parochial school using appropriate oversampling techniques as necessary. Ultimately, based on a number of factors described below, I sampled from the schools in each cluster willing to participate. Despite my oversampling, I was unable to garner enough participation, especially in lower-income neighborhoods, from the school tours. Therefore, during the period of the study, I also recruited parents from pre-schools within some of the chosen clusters. I attended a parent event at a Head Start serving a diverse group of lower income families in the central part of the city and had the survey flyer handed out at a parent event at a North-end preschool and a South-end Preschool. The recruitment flyers and the surveys were translated into Vietnamese and Spanish. Below is a table of the schools I targeted for survey recruitment.

Table 2.

Recruitment Framework for Survey by Middle School Cluster: School type and methods of

distribution

	Method of Dist.
School type in Middle School Cluster A **(Cluster Free and Reduced Lunch – 16%)**	
Private	I attended tours*
Religious	They published a web link to flyer
Option	I attended tours*
Option	They distributed
Preschool	They distributed*
School type in Middle School Cluster B **(Cluster Free and Reduced Lunch – 50%)**	
Private	They distributed
Private	They sent recruitment email*
Parochial	I attended tours*
Public	They distributed
Public	I attended tours*
School type in Middle School Cluster C **(Cluster Free and Reduced Lunch – 82%)**	
Public	They distributed
Preschool	I attended event*
Parochial	They distributed
Parochial	They distributed
School type in Middle School Cluster D **(Cluster Free and Reduced Lunch – 65%)**	
Option	I attended tours*
Private	They distributed
Public	I attended tour
Public	They distributed
Preschool	They distributed flyers

*These are schools from which I have confirmed participants.

Once the schools were chosen, I contacted the school principal/head via phone and email requesting the participation of his or her school. In some cases, I was given permission to attend the school tours, give a brief overview of my study to the attendees, and hand out a recruitment flyer; in other cases, the principals handed out my recruitment flyers for me (see Appendix F for sample recruitment flyers). Interested parents either returned the information sheet to me with their contact information at the end of the tour or contacted me later to express interest in participating. Interested participants were then contacted via email and sent a link to the survey. In instances where computer access was limited, I provided hard copies of the survey to be returned to me in person or by mail.

Survey Recruitment Limitations. Some limitations that impacted my survey recruitment and participation were as follows:

1) Seattle Public Schools initially denied my request for conducting the survey during the tours. I appealed the decision multiple times and was eventually granted permission to begin in late January. At that point, I had already missed tours at a number of the schools within my designated cluster framework.

2) Within private and parochial schools, the response to participation was underwhelming. Three schools declined to participate, six schools did not return my calls or emails, and five schools did not have a way to effectively distribute survey recruitment information.

3) The same was true at the Seattle Public Schools; gaining permission was difficult especially given the short timeframe left for tours once I had been granted permission.

4) Many of the schools in the lower SES clusters had very few active searchers. Two schools, for example, told me that—while they agreed to hand out my survey information—only one person had signed up for any of their tours or open houses.

5) I did not have control over the distribution method. In some cases, I was able to attend the tours, speak to potential participants, hand out my recruitment flyer directly, and even collect information from interested participants. More frequently, however, schools chose to hand the recruitment flyers out themselves or distribute the information via email. The only way I had to track whether schools actually followed through on the distribution was by anecdote, through email, asking potential participants where they had received information about the study. Anecdotally, the schools where I attended the tours had higher participation rates than the others. In Table 2, I have starred the schools from which I had confirmed participation.

A more detailed discussion of the study's limitations is included in Chapter 8.

Data Analysis

Analysis was the main point of methodological integration. Per concurrent data analysis procedures for embedded, mixed method design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007), the interview and survey data were prepared and explored separately. The interview data was analyzed first, and then the survey data was analyzed with an eye to triangulating the interview findings—to confirm or dis-confirm identified themes and patterns. The two data sets are presented separately in the findings sections and then merged in the discussion chapter.

Interview analysis. The interviews were transcribed and then imported into and coded using NVIVO software. I read each interview through twice, initially creating nodes suggested by the conceptual framework, such as *academics*, *search activities, mother's job,* and *communication between partners.* As I read through the nodes, using the constant comparative method (Merriman, 1998) and writing analytic memos, I noticed other patterns and themes and expanded the nodes to include new items such as *preschool* and *moving.* The constant comparative method involves

creating categories based on the analysis of the data and constantly refining those categories as we

develop new understandings and hypotheses of the relationships between the categories and the

data. This method is essential to the development of grounded theory, the term for deriving

theoretical claims from qualitative data (Merriam, 1998; Strauss, 1997). Analytic memos serve as a

reminder to the researcher as he or she develops new ideas about the way the data fit in categories or

the links between categories.

  I then read the transcripts again with an eye towards the new nodes I had created. I also re-

read the full series of each person's interviews to create and compare timelines and trajectories of

the choosing process. Eventually, I merged the nodes into the most robust analytic categories guided

by Merriman's guidelines for the derivation of effective categories (1998), each with multiple sub-

nodes. Then, by applying the conceptual frame to my understanding of a category, I created a stance

or a claim about the data. Those main nodes, or analytic categories, became the basis for the

primary claims about the interview findings.

  A good example of how this process evolved is with the category and findings related to

academic quality. Because academic quality and the characteristics of academic programs parents

are looking for have been a main focus of school-choice research, I began coding specifically for

parents' thoughts about test scores and their "ideal" school characteristics. As I was doing that, I

noticed the references to boredom and supplementing; I wrote myself a memo: "maybe

supplementing deserves its own category. It is widespread," so I made those each their own analytic

categories or nodes. Eventually, I began to see a link between challenge, boredom, supplementing,

and parents' desired school characteristics, so I re-established a node labeled *academics* and created

sub-nodes for all the related categories. I then re-read the transcripts to understand the relationship

between the ways parents talked about challenge, giftedness, boredom, supplementing, test scores,

and other academic characteristics to identify the claims I could make about the ways these tied

together and were common among all (or most) of the participants.

Survey analysis. The survey data were imported into SPSS. They were initially scrubbed for

any incomplete responses (of which there were four). I also imputed two full cases because of

conflicts between the stated parent role – mother – and the gender – male. While I know there might

be other reasons for that role/gender combination to be valid, I had no way to confirm those reasons

and, therefore, threw out the cases. I also looked at any "Other" responses, erasing any extra

commentary and determining if the response fit within another response category or could be coded

"Other." Regarding the question "In what Seattle neighborhood do you live?" since this was an

open response category, originally there were over 33 different neighborhoods; I looked up the

Seattle neighborhood boundary map and re-categorized the responses into 16 neighborhoods. I also

created a second data set with women's responses only.

Then I explored the descriptive data for variation and general trends that could inform the

analysis. I generated descriptive data through SPSS for all major variables and ran cross-tabs to

explore potential relationships between categories. Lastly, I ran chi-square analyses on a broad

range of variables. Chi-square was the best test to run for these data because they were all

categorical/nominal. Chi-square allowed me to compare groups—like men and women, working

women and non-working women—across variables and test a "goodness of fit" of observed

distribution/frequency with a theoretical distribution/frequency.

Initially these analyses did not yield valid results because the tests violated the chi-square

assumption of 20% or fewer of the cells having an expected count of fewer than five. In other

words, the combination of my small sample size and multiple variables produced inadequate counts

for analysis.

On a few variables, I re-coded the date to create fewer categories to see if I could meet the expected count criteria and not violate the chi-square assumptions. Questions for which I re-coded responses included these:

1. *Who provides the majority of weekday child care for the child entering Kindergarten?*

   I put this information into two categories: preschool and non-preschool, to see if there were any statistically significant results occurring between children who were in preschool for the majority of the week and everyone else.

2. *Who is primarily responsible for the school choice activities for this child?*

   This was re-labeled to create two categories: both parents and one parent.

3. *How many hours will the family spend on school choice related activities (consider tours, applications, enrollment forms, web research; do not include conversations with friends and family members about school)?*

   I created two categories: less than 10 hours and 11 or more. The original data were able to fit into these labels without having any outliers.

4. *How many conversations do you have, per week, about your school search for this child?*

   I created two categories: fewer than 5 and more than 6. The original data were able to fit into these labels without having any outliers.

5. *Last year, in which category did your total family income fall?*

   This was re-labeled to create two categories: $10,000–$99,999 and more than $100,000.

6. *What work do you currently do?*

   I created two categories: full-time work outside the home and not full-time work outside the home, to see if there were any statistically significant results occurring

in search behavior between those who worked full time outside the home and

those who didn't.

The survey and the interviews allowed me to holistically investigate the school choice process

and examine the ways social factors like gender and class shaped parental behaviors and attitudes

about schools. Interviewing women, over the course of 4–6 months, allowed me to address the

important methodological issues raised in Chapter 2. By interviewing over time and during the

choice process, I addressed the hindsight bias issues of retrospective methods. I was also able to

investigate the ways in which preferences were/were not shaped over time and in reaction to

search activities (Bell, 2008). And, most importantly, I was able to hear women's voices and

construct a clearer sense of household dynamics and women's role in choosing. The survey was

intended to address some of the same issues, including hindsight bias and household dynamics.

Further, the survey allowed for a broader accounting of the phenomena identified by the

qualitative methods.

CHAPTER 5

INTERVIEW FINDINGS: PREFERENCES, PROCESS, AND POLICY

During the 2010–11 school year, I spent six months, from December through May, interviewing 8 mothers about their experiences choosing a kindergarten for their children. Two male partners were interviewed at the end of the school choice process, in June. They were all active choosers in that they were searching for information about school options other than their assigned neighborhood schools. As described in Chapter 4, they were considering their neighborhood public school, public schools outside their neighborhood, option schools, parochial schools, and independent private schools. I watched them take the typical steps in choice making—seeking and collecting information, making lists, going on tours, debating their preferences, ruling some schools out and others in—steps that the majority of school choice research focuses on. I also witnessed these families struggling with the messier, less understood components of school choosing. I followed them through the highs and lows of the process and watched them grapple as their schooling preferences butted up against their other values and pending decisions as parents and people.

The interviews were intended to add to the thickening of school-choice research, which has largely neglected the context and process of school choosing and failed to investigate how the positionality of the chooser makes a difference and how her race, class, neighborhood, and family shape interact with her preferences. This chapter and Chapter 6 describe the experiences of these10 Seattle parents with the kindergarten choosing process. What was their decision-making process like? What factors did they care about most? What were they looking for in a school? What sources of information did they use to find what they were looking for? And how did their race, class, gender, and neighborhood shape how and what they chose?

Overall, I found the school-choosing process fraught with anxiety for parents. From the hard work of juggling schedules and devoting time to the process, to constant conversations with networks, partners, and family members, to the consideration of what their school choice said about their family's values, this process evoked profound feelings for families. Much of the decision-making struggle – and ensuing anxiety – was not related, specifically, to academic concerns about schools but to issues surrounding the choice and the choice process: from logistics to heated spousal debates to value tensions. This contrasts, somewhat, with existing literature on choice, which suggests parents choose primarily on academic grounds. While academics are always in the conversation, they share the stage with a wide range of other concerns. Further, these parents' definitions of academic quality were muddy and shifting. They had a hard time matching their preferences with the information they received through tours, websites, and other formal means. They relied on conversations with friends and family and on "mom networks": listservs and pre-schools in particular. Parents' experiences with preschools also provided parents with a good deal of information about their own children and what they were looking for in a school. Finally, I found that while most of the parents agreed, theoretically, with the new Seattle Schools' assignment policy, they were frustrated by its implications for them.

[Because of the timing of the study, the majority of the references to tours and open houses throughout this chapter (and the next) refer to public schools. If a comment refers to a private or parochial school, it is noted as such.]

Academic Preferences

Throughout the choosing process, all of the parents interviewed were confused about how to gauge a school's academic program, both what they were looking for (their own preferences)

and how to "see" it. During the process many were grappling with understanding the purpose of

kindergarten and shaping a sense of what they wanted for their child in kindergarten and beyond.

This section examines what parents want, look for, and learn about schools and education during

the search process.

Test scores and testing. From the beginning, all of the parents were conflicted, at best,

about the use of test scores as an indicator for a good program. Anna, a single unemployed

mother of one daughter, shared her ambivalence about test scores: "I'm kind of researching test

scores and stuff, but I'm not a firm believer in test scores." Despite this ambivalence, the

majority of the parents, like Anna, used the scores as a starting point in their school search. The

availability of test scores and test score data on the Seattle Public Schools website made this

information a routine "first stop" on the path to seeking information about schools: their

neighborhood school's test scores were typically the first piece of information the families

sought.

Reagan, a low-income student and mother of two, rattled off a list of nearby public and

private schools she and her partner were considering for their son Jason because their

neighborhood school's "scores are a lot lower than any of the other elementary schools in the

area…shockingly lower" and "that really freaks us out." Similarly, Susan, a working mother

with two kids and three jobs, was "horrified" by the test scores at her neighborhood school:

> *I knew that it didn't have a great reputation. But then I started to look at the data*
>
> *and….the numbers are horrific for that school, in particular. They're pretty*
>
> *standout bad. There are a lot of schools in the South End that are bad. And*
>
> *they're particularly bad. And I think they're-, they were the worst in the district.*

Even if this information was the first stop on the school choice journey and a driver in the decision to participate in the school "market," all of the parents still expressed a general discomfort with the idea of testing itself and the validity of test score data for the particular schools they were considering. Helene, a part-time nurse and mother of one daughter, expressed what many parents did about both the need to use test scores as information and simultaneously her disdain for doing so: *"I've started looking at the WASL test results but I hate looking at the test results. That's really not how I want to make my decision about a school. And yet, at the same time, I realize it does present a part of the picture but it's so not how I want to base my decision."*

One of the main issues a few parents had with looking at scores was that they were not proponents of testing as an educational tool. Trina, a private school administrator with one daughter, felt strongly that testing is problematic for education:

> *just the notion that . . . we make decisions on kids on a test and instead of the day-to-day progress. That we don't teach kids anymore where they're at. We assume that they need to be here, and if they're not here they're . . . they're less than that. And that's problematic for me. And so . . . my anxiety around public education still, if I'm being honest, is around that testing.*

Reagan, who was concerned about her neighborhood school's low scores, was similarly disenchanted with the notion of "teaching to the test." Referring to the Seattle Public Schools and the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), she contended *"the curriculum is very WASL based and they're not really teaching the kids a whole lot to think out of the box or analyze things from different angles, which I think is much more important. That's what you do in college and you need to start young, I think."*

Another issue a few parents had with test scores was that they didn't know how to

interpret them. Libby, a working mother of two boys, shared that she and her husband were

keeping a folder of the "the print-outs, the sheets from each school" with the test scores on them.

And as she was trying to figure them out, she realized they were "skewed." Because the data did

not separate out the Advanced Placement Program (APP) kids from the non-APP kids, at her

neighborhood school, it was hard for her to tell what the averages she was looking at represent.

This APP conundrum caused confusion for the parents whose neighborhood schools had APP or

Spectrum programs. As Netu, a stay-at-home mother of one girl, pointed out, "Of course having

APP brings the scores up. [Our neighborhood school] would actually be a failing school if it

probably didn't have a Spectrum program there." Because scores are not disaggregated by

"program," parents had no way of knowing the academic landscape for the mainstream classes,

and since they didn't know if their child would test into APP, the scores told them very little at

these bi-furcated schools.

Kindergarten: academic or social? Looking at and thinking about test scores was just

the beginning of parents' confusion about academics and academic quality. They all also

grappled with how to weigh the social versus academic components of schooling and to what

degree academics were important to consider, if at all, in kindergarten. Susan, who was clear that

the scores of her neighborhood school were too low, was less clear about the overall role that

testing and academics, in general, should play in her decision making:

> *We'll tour Puget Sound School, which is our option school, and see (what we*
>
> *think). I'm hesitant about Puget Sound because I'm kind of a believer in . . . I*
>
> *don't want my child to be taught for tests, but I do want her to learn how to read*
>
> *and write. I talked to a lot of parents at Puget Sounds who are like, 'That's not*

> *what we care about.' And I mean, they kind of want their child to have a good,*
>
> *happy school experience, but I want my daughter to have that, too, but I'm*
>
> *definitely of the mind that, you know, they're there to do some academic work*
>
> *even in elementary school.*

Netu took a counter approach. She didn't think that her daughter, Lily, was going to learn very much in kindergarten, so she was looking for a kindergarten with more of a social focus:

> *That's why I'm looking for half-day kindergarten because I really don't think*
>
> *she's going to academically get a whole lot out of it to make it really worthwhile*
>
> *being there all day. Basically kindergarten is more of a social thing because I*
>
> *don't think academically there's going be a whole lot for Lily to learn.*

Netu believed that a major, albeit "awful," part of kindergarten was just getting used to being in a classroom all day, the physical aspects of sitting and being at a desk and waiting in line.

Reagan had heard similar messages about socialization from teachers at the various tours and open houses she attended. However, she felt very strongly that being told kindergarten was just for socialization was an effort to keep lower-income families like hers from asking hard questions and demanding a lot for their kids. The kindergarten teacher at her neighborhood school told her and her husband, AJ, "this is just kindergarten, these kids are just in kindergarten, it's more about socialization." Reagan was angry and frustrated with this push toward socialization in the public schools she visited:

> (*the teachers*) *really de-emphasized the academic and emphasized the social and*
>
> *it really bothered me because AJ and I are both like, they're not telling the kids*
>
> *who go to the Treetop [private] school that. They're not telling the kids that go to*
>
> *Westburg [private] school that. Those kids are learning, and they're not learning*

> *the social stuff. That comes along with being in school. You can't help that part.*
>
> *That part just happens as you learn to navigate the world.*

All the parents grappled with this concern to a degree—weighing what they heard from teachers on tours with what they thought was important for their children, academically. At her first open house, Libby was a little surprised to discover such a focus on social aspects of schooling:

> *I mean, one of the things that the kindergarten teachers were saying is, you know,*
>
> *a lot of the first year, especially the first couple of months in the first year is just*
>
> *social skills. Like, how do you slow your feet so you don't run away from people.*
>
> *Or how do you, you know, lessen your voice so you aren't yelling and how do you*
>
> *not stomp feet but use your words. And so I was like, OK, I mean, those are all*
>
> *just kind of a social skills, so it's all good.*

She said she and her husband "want[ed] high education standards" and it was unclear to them whether what they were looking for was even reasonable in the context of the public schools and the focus on socialization.

> Conversely, Sasha had heard schools selling her on their test scores while she thought she might be interested in a more nurturing, emotionally oriented kindergarten for her son.

> *I have to figure out what's most important to us. Is it academics? (The schools)*
>
> *are showing me how great they are by their test scores. They're showing me how*
>
> *great they are by their advanced placement program. They're showing me, you*
>
> *know, how great they are by… that they're doing long division and different*
>
> *things and . . . so I think, OK. Do we want him to . . . do great academically? And*
>
> *if that's the case, then where's-, where's that gonna happen? But if it's more*

about this other thing…if it's nurturing and this, you know, I've heard the Valley

School has sort of an in-the-middle environment.

So while Sasha was out looking for schools, she was concurrently wondering what exactly she

was looking for with regard to that balance between the social and the academic. Her son

attended a Waldorf preschool, and she was well aware of the philosophical differences between

his preschool and what she was hearing from other schools about the importance of academics.

She was not yet sure what she wanted for him or how to find that "in the middle environment"

that might offer some of both. She, Libby, Susan, Helen, and Reagan did not have a clear or

stable set of preferences; their thinking was shaped in response to what they saw and heard as

they interacted with schools. High academic quality or "the ideal school" was not a fixed idea

they had prior to starting the search process.

Holistic and challenging. Defining that "in the middle environment" – that balance

between social and academic focus – was at the heart of parents trying to articulate their ideal

academic environment. Everyone's definitions of a high-quality educational experience varied

and shifted throughout the choosing process. As evidenced by the examples above, most parents

responded to what they heard on tours and questioned if what they heard was what they wanted.

When asked specifically what characterized a good school, half of the parents expressed a clear

vision while the rest were less sure, suggesting a range of possibilities.

Libby and her husband both identified "educating the whole child" as the ideal

philosophy of a good school for them and their son, Jackson. Speaking of one of the school's

websites, Libby said, "It speaks very much to the values that we're really interested in having.

And it was more about how to *educate the child as a whole*, and how do you incorporate like

volunteerism, social justice." For Libby's husband, Harry, the school that he liked best also

focused on the "whole child": "It was like that well-rounded thing. It was everything from play's

important to writing is important, to writers' workshops to you know, P.E. and arts to math."

Anna, Trina, and Susan named their ideal school in relation to teachers and teaching,

particularly differentiated teaching. Anna described her ideal school this way:

> *teachers who are flexible in accommodating differing levels of—not intelligence—*
>
> *but skills and teachers who are open, who are genuinely interested in kids and*
>
> *their little personalities and helping them, I guess, just be who they naturally are*
>
> *and not trying to force them into one mold. I guess— yeah, teachers are open*
>
> *minded.*

For Trina, *"the ideal school is in my head where teachers teach kids where they are. And not*

from where they need them to be. I just want somebody to figure out how she best learns, and

then teach her. And that looks different for every kid, for every class."

There is one thing parents were clear about and that is what they <u>didn't</u> want. If an

expression of an ideal educational approach or academic quality was hard to name, its opposite

was easy for them to name: boredom. I address this notion of boredom in more detail in Chapter

6, but it is worth noting here that <u>every</u> parent I interviewed, mothers and fathers, mentioned this

concern about boredom, without prompting. This widespread concern was expressed using

strong and compelling language. For example, numerous people reminded Anna to keep looking

for a school where her daughter, Ever, would not be bored, including Ever's preschool teacher,

who told Anna "*keep a good eye on her and don't let her get bored.*" Anna's sister, who is a

first-grade teacher, also told her, "*You can't stick her into a normal public kindergarten. You*

can't do it, she'll be bored to death." So Anna's "deepest fear" about school for Ever "*is that*

she's being squelched or being over looked or bored."

Trina, drawing on her own experiences, also expressed strong fears about boredom: *"But I don't want her to be stagnant and I don't want her to be bored. Because that was me. You know, and I know what that feels like, and it just sucks. You know? It just sucks. I don't want my kid lost in the fray. I don't want her, you know, I don't want her bored. I want her attended to."* And Reagan's push to find the right school for Jason hinged on similar concerns: *"I don't know…part of it is because…he is such a smart kid that we worry he'll get bored or that the teachers won't…they will have their hands full with so many other students that he will get pushed to the background."* Her husband AJ had the same fears and equated his desire for high educational standards with no boredom and, instead, excitement: *"We want high education standards. Like hell, I want my kid-, I don't want to walk into school one day and it's, you know, utter chaos. I don't want him to be bored. I want the excitement. I loved school when I was a kid. I had good teachers, I had bad teachers, but school, I loved."* So, while it was difficult for parents to say what they are looking for; they were clear about what they did not want.

A similar notion – about what is possibly the opposite of boredom – arose as families talked about whether their child might, in first grade, qualify for the district's gifted programs: APP or Spectrum. All but two of the parents described their children as "bright" or "smart" or "gifted." While they were not sure whether the APP program was right for their child, all except one parent (even the two who did not explicitly describe their children as gifted were investigating APP) saw it as a possibility on the horizon. Trina was unaware of the program, but she did refer to her daughter as smart and gifted. Regarding his son Jason, AJ said, *"We don't know about [APP]. But we want him…He seems bright, so we want him wherever, whatever school he needs to be in to be challenged."* When Anna told some friends about one of the option schools she was thinking of, those parents told her that *"it's not really the place to be"* if you

have a "gifted" or "advanced" child and need teachers who are going to "push and challenge" her. Netu spoke often of Lily being "leaps and bounds" ahead. But she was also aware of her inquiries about Lily's intelligence being received by teachers with expressions of "Oh, sure, honey. Everybody's parent thinks that." So, she said, until "some teacher or someone in the system" recognizes Lily's intelligence, she can only speculate about "whether APP is an appropriate program for her."

Searching for Preferences in Action: Proxies

Even as parents were shaping an idea of WHAT they were looking for—challenge, socialization, holistic approach—they were similarly trying to figure out HOW they might see these attributes or characteristics in action. Half of the parents expressed explicit hope they would go on tours or to open houses and see evidence of the type of education they were looking for. Sometimes that was the case, but more often they were left casting about, trying to understand what they had seen and make sense of it based on what they were looking for. This section examines how parents tried to see their preferences throughout the school-choosing process and how they made sense of the information they got.

Libby's husband Harry was hoping for a clear-cut, objective experience when touring schools. What he experienced, however, was much more subjective:

So we would go to these open houses and you're trying to be rational and apply
some uniform standard across the thing, but at the end of the day, you're kind of
like 'Well, that person seemed . . .' You know, I mean, it then feels very
subjective." I really felt like when we got done with the whole thing, I was like,
'Wow, this is really unscientific.' It seems like, there's a part of me that like, you

know, that wants to have things be much more kind of in that research mode and

it-, it didn't feel that way. It's all very subjective.

Similarly, Netu found that it was "just really hard…to tell" anything from the tours. For example, when she went on a tour and the talk the teacher gave was not inspirational or informative, she wondered, "Does that mean that she's not a good teacher? Or does that mean she just feels uncomfortable talking to adults?" She wondered how much she should read into that in making a determination about the school. Even when Netu went on tours and saw teachers actually teaching, she went away feeling like she hadn't seen learned anything important and she was left with just a general "feeling" about the school. Describing the tour at her neighborhood school, she said,

I felt like when I went to the tour, it was really hard to evaluate the teachers…Even

though we were in the classroom for a minute or two, it was for so short a time that I

couldn't really tell how good the teacher was and how good the kids are. You know, how

good they're doing, and so you just come back with sort of a very general feeling about

the school, the place, the environment, how crowded it is. How run down it is.

Using proxies to judge schools. The way Netu picked up on "crowded" and "run down" as cues about the school points to the ways in which all the parents used "proxies" to judge the academic characteristics and educational environment of schools. Because parents didn't know exactly what they were looking for nor how to see it, they had to adjust to what information they were offered at each school.

All of the parents used teachers to assess schools or get a sense of what a school was like. Teachers, either on a tour or during an open house, were typically the main point of contact and played a major role in determining these parents' impressions of a school for good or bad. In

some ways, teachers and teaching are not proxies; they are part and parcel of a quality educational experience; however, most parents did not see teachers actually teaching. They saw teachers speaking or giving a tour or showing their classroom. Parents had casual conversations with teachers. So these non-teaching interactions became proxies for what parents gleaned about the schools. At an open house, Anna described how "*the very first classroom I went in the teacher was just expressionless. Blah. No smile, no warm welcoming attitude. Just kind of like here I am, what do you want to know*?"

Similarly Reagan and AJ *"did not like the kindergarten teachers AT ALL"* at one of their open houses. Reagan said*, "they were both relatively older and both closer to retirement. They seemed really tired."* For both families, these interactions gave them negative impressions about the school as a whole as not the type of nurturing and warm places they would like to send their children.

On the other hand, Libby described the strong positive feeling she got from meeting teachers at an open house: "*I definitely liked it. The teachers that I was able to meet were really jazzed and really felt like that they were people that I would want Jackson to be in school with."* Sasha had a similar positive experience on a tour: *"I don't know what class he was teaching, but you walked into his room and you just were-, I like even wanted to learn…And that's what I want. …very, experienced and warm and nurturing staff."*

Proxy: parental involvement. Over half of the parents also used levels of parent involvement, both financial and volunteer commitment to the school, to glean information about the school. Talking about her tour at Spruce Elementary, Libby described the ways in which the PTA fundraising had allowed the school to have a wide range of extracurriculars, "*more than at other schools.*" While it would provide her son, Jackson, with more of the well-rounded

opportunities that are important to her, she also loved "*it because we love how involved the parents are.*" Reagan also had her eye on parental involvement based on advice she received from a friend who told her "*when you go on tours…ask about the PTA and the PTA budget, and if the PTA has a large budget…even if the school test scores aren't good, that could be because of ESL. If the PTA has a sizable budget, that means the parents are active and the school is good.*" Reagan concluded that was a good way to look at things because she could *"see what the parents are like and then we can know more what the kids are like."*

As parents went on tours, they gauged parent involvement in the school, commenting either positively *"I liked it because it seemed like a safe and a caring place, a lot of parental involvement"* or negatively *"I only saw one parent the whole time even though they say there's a lot of parent involvement."*

Proxy: environment and aesthetics. Another proxy used by almost all of the parents to glean information about a school was the environment; the aesthetics and physical characteristics (crowded, run-down) of the school were not immune from analytic treatment. Everything from a school's architecture to its smell to its lighting was grist for the mill in understanding what a school was like. Art, in particular, served a major role as a proxy for Libby and Sasha, who paid close attention to the kids' art on the walls of the schools they visited. For Libby, the art suggested the school is "very kid-focused and centered." At one school, she particularly appreciated that *"a lot of things that are written on the walls, in the kids' handwriting, and not kind of like tracing, but really just . . . and you can see kind of like the backward N and all that kind of stuff."* To her this suggested the school was really "celebrating where they kids *are"* and not just putting forward the kids' best or most polished work. Sasha used the art on the walls to gauge the "personality" and "creative environment" at the school. On tours she looked

specifically for "*how much art is on the walls, what kind of art is on the walls and . . . things like that.*"

Architecture and physical lay out too shape parents' impressions. Physically descriptive terms like "crowded," "open," "barren," "cluttered," "dark and cavernous" peppered all parents' descriptions of their visits. Sometimes negative physical attributes were overcome by other positive impressions. Libby, for example, described her visit to Riverview Elementary, at first, as physically off-putting: *"They have all portables all over the place and a lot of . . . a lot of concrete."* However, she appreciated how they are trying to *"compensate for some of the concrete feel with, they have a greenhouse and, you know, a lot of planting in beds."* Ultimately, the community gardening and other enrichment offered at Riverview moved it to the top of her list and she was *"willing to trade the whole, grassy, beautiful kind of like maybe Spruce school field to the Riverview, all asphalt but, you know, this is what you get when you're inside the building."*

Similarly, when Harry visited Williams, an option school, he came away with a very positive feeling because of the alignment of the "teachers, the structure, and the environment." He described in detail his feelings of being in the school taking in the physical structure of the classrooms. Williams had "*a kindergarten-first grade space and it's just those classrooms. They've got their own little playground. And the two kindergarten classrooms have a hallway in the middle of them, but all glass between the two, and then they open up the doors, so the kids are actually back and forth between the two classrooms all the time.*"

Even though the class size was larger than he would have liked, he contended that the layout made it feel more "personal" and, combined with the mission-driven nature of the school, gave him the feeling that he "*would like to have (his) kid there.*"

Gathering Information: Mom Networks

Besides gleaning information from tours and open houses, parents used a wide variety of other means to collect information about schools. As discussed earlier, they used the SPS website to gather testing and other statistical information and, sometimes, to find information about tours and open houses. However, they all ended up relying more on informal networks and friends than on the formal sources of information. All of the women wrestled with how much credence to give the different sources of information. While Anna relied on her "group of mom friends," she wished for more formalized support from the district:

> *I wish there was one person at the school district who I could just talk to instead*
>
> *of having to go to all these schools and ferret out information and happen to meet*
>
> *somebody who tells me something… and go on what my main group of mom*
>
> *friends say. I mean that's all good and I value that but it seems disconnected like,*
>
> *like there should be someone at the school district that I could just go make an*
>
> *appointment with and talk about all these options and make a plan.*

This section describes parent information sources, including preschools, "moms groups," and listservs.

Preschool. All of the families being interviewed had their child enrolled in a preschool. Since they had already gone through that process and invested time and money to find a preschool that suited their needs, they all had experience, information, and feedback about the values, preferences, and constraints associated with making schooling choices about their child. Libby compared their elementary school search to their search for Jackson's preschool, Pinewood:

We had to do research to go to Pinewood. When we were trying to figure that out,

we just looked at a couple of schools in the neighborhood. We kind of narrowed it

down to like "what did we think was important for, you know, a 3-year-old?"

Which is different than what you think is important for a 5-year-old, or an 8-year-

old. So, and that sort of seemed to go very well for the two of us, just in terms of

like what we are looking for and how we make the decisions and things like that.

Preschool served as an information source for all the families in a number of ways: the relationship with the preschool taught parents about the type of relationship and involvement they would like with a school, and the school's approach and philosophy taught them about what is a fit for them and their child. Lastly, the feedback from the preschool taught them something about their child as a learner that they could use in the kindergarten-choosing process.

While all of this learning from preschool was evident in all the families to some extent, a few things stood out. First, for half of the families, the philosophical approach of their preschool was so compelling that every kindergarten was compared against the preschool. In many cases, the preschool set the bar for what was expected from an elementary school. Trina was particularly compelled by her daughter's preschool:

If I could win a million dollars that pre-school would have it…. It's one that lives

up to the mission of diversity…and it is the one place that I have found, including

my current school that I teach at, that actually understands diversity, and not just

to be about race. Not just to be about class and not just to be about learning styles

. . . it's inclusive of everything. And they fight for that.

Similarly, Susan described her daughter's preschool as a "*warm environment*" rich with "*deep emotional connection,*" and a "*cocoon of warmth and love*" that will be

extremely difficult for her to "rip" her daughter away from if that's what they choose. Four of the eight families were considering leaving their children in the preschool as one of the kindergarten options: two families were in a pre-school that also served an elementary population; one family was in a preschool with a "5's" program, and another family considered keeping their son back for another year in the same preschool.

All of the families spoke of their preschool as a resource and network. For the three families who had their children in co-op preschools, this was particularly true. A component of the co-op preschool is parent education. Each of these co-ops had parent education nights dedicated to choosing a kindergarten. Speakers came in to offer advice and even consult with parents about their choice-making.

Helen found that while the speakers were informative, the constant chatter about schools with other co-op preschool mothers made her "frazzled": But it also provided her with important information in the form of conversations and access to a school-choice educator who talked about "coming to terms with like what you value in education. You know, what your partner values in education, and kind of what that might look like, and how it might express itself."

Anna described how her co-op preschool network worked for her as she, and the other parents, tried to understand the information on the Seattle Public Schools' website:

> There were two versions [of the SPS website] and that was really confusing so
> there's been some kind of email discussion between all the preschool parents at
> the co-op. We have this shared listserv thing and everybody's in the same boat.
> Everybody's visiting, so the things that didn't makes sense a few people sent
> emails and a lot of people made phone calls to the district. And then we share
> what we find out.

This network – or shared human capital – made the search process for each of the co-op families easier as they shared information about what they have learned about deadlines, processes, and even schools.

Preschool also taught all the parents about their children and about their own preferences in ways that shaped their approach to kindergarten**.** For Helene, being a part of a co-op school helped her *realize "I* like *knowing what's going on in my daughter's life. I like being able to play with her friends. . . And just see[ing] how kids are developing and maybe carrying over some of the lessons from school into home."* For her then, when she visited a school that excluded parents from the classroom, that was a "*red flag*."

Netu's daughter Lily had some bumps at her first preschool. She "*was getting upset, having tantrums at school."* Netu and her husband went through *"a lot of stuff to try to figure out what was going on,"* and they ultimately changed preschools. For Netu "*that was sort of a wakeup call to her learning. I have got to figure out what's going to be the right fit for her."* This experience was a big part of what shaped Netu's thinking on how important it was for Lily not be bored and that her school needed to be more play-oriented than academic.

Moms' groups. In the next chapter, I discuss, more specifically, the way gender and family decision making shapes school choosing. However, I do want to include here a brief discussion of the important ways mothers engaged their *mom networks* to learn about and discuss their school choosing. Along with the co-op groups, which were predominantly, though not 100% attended by women, moms' listservs played a big role in the dissemination of school choice information.

Libby described how, without her neighborhood Moms Listserv, she would have been at a loss:

The way I've been finding out about a lot of stuff is I'm on a listserv, Midvale

Moms Listserv which…parents of kids who are in these public schools will say

Hey, by the way, I really like my school – We really like the Midvale School. We

know it's been getting bad press. You should come and talk to the principal.

Here's one of the principal's dates, you know, Coffee Chats. And so there's one

about Williams. And so because of that, it prompted me to follow this link that

they were imbedding. And in the link, goes to the enrollment page of the Seattle

Public Schools, which in there goes to a PDF, which then takes you through two

pages of . . . if you know what grouping you're in, or, you know, so we're in Polk

and Pinewood, those are the two kind of groups that we would look at. And then

you can kind of pull that up and they have it just posted of when the Open Houses

and dates are and the times that are scheduled. If I wasn't on the List Serve, I

would be at a loss. You wouldn't know how to get there. Or I would be kind of like

digging around. I would probably find it but I would be like even more freaked

out because it wasn't prominently displayed.

Susan described a similar process for finding information:

I went on the District website yesterday, to look at one of the tours. I couldn't find

them anywhere. It was very frustrating. So I had to actually go to the Moms

Listserv, because I know that somebody had a link to the spot on the website that

lists all the tours. So I got it from Centerville Moms ListServ.

In both cases, the informal network provided more reliable or useful information than the official

source – the school district. Similar to the preschool networks, however, these listserv

connections brought both wanted and unwanted exchanges. Susan described the battles that

occurred in her neighborhood between those who intended to attend the neighborhood school

and those who didn't. The battles, she said

> *happen at the playground and play dates but they also happen on the*
>
> *Centerville listserv… So there are a couple of parents who have sent gobs*
>
> *and gobs of emails to the Centerville listserv rallying behind [the*
>
> *neighborhood school]. 'It's the neighborhood that's the problem. If there*
>
> *were just more white kids in (the school).' I'm not really paraphrasing.*
>
> *So yes, there's a lot of chatter on that listserv and so I stay way off that.*

Despite trying to stay away, Susan found herself in the midst of an online brawl when an email

she sent to another mother stating that her neighborhood school's *"scores are really, really low,*

and they've been low for ten years, they've been rapidly declining for ten years" got forwarded

to someone else who sent a mass email blasting "*people like Susan*" who were a "*part of the*

problem" because they bad-mouthed the public schools.

Beyond online forums, all of the women were in conversation, day in and day out, with

other mothers, neighbors, colleagues, and playground acquaintances. These mom affinity groups

served as major networks for information. For Anna, *"just being around all these moms all the*

time" meant that she heard so much about schools that she didn't need to look at them herself,

and she was *"inclined to put those on the list"* that she had heard about from other moms

because she is pressed for time and "*toured-out.*"

Seattle Policy Issues and Constraints

Difficulties finding and navigating official information from the school district, as

described above, was just one of the policy and procedural issues that arose through the search

process. All but one of the parents expressed confusion about whether choosing was truly

allowed and encouraged under the new assignment system. On the one hand, they knew they were being encouraged to attend their assigned school. On the other hand, tours and open houses were still available at most schools, so parents were unclear on the message from and intent of the school district. Helene was confused by the late and half-hearted nature of the school open houses. She knew schools *"don't need to do a dog and pony show anymore"* but if there were still choices available, shouldn't they at least act a little bit like they are trying to attract people?

Libby felt the same confusion and admitted "*being in denial*" about the move away from choice. She lamented the lack-luster tours: "*my husband keeps reminding me they [the public schools] don't need to get you*." Susan thought the district was engaged in a bit of "*double talk*." *"The district's position is funny. Like, we didn't get rid of choice. You still have choice…You're guaranteed your spot in the neighborhood school, but you still have choices . . . sort of."*

The disconnect of these parents being "on the market" for schools and the public schools not fully acknowledging the market was an undercurrent that ran through the process, especially for the families who were looking at both private and parochial schools (seven of the eight families). Those seven families all needed substantial aid to be able to attend a private school. Those private school processes and logistics as well as the distinction between the two "markets" is beyond the scope of this paper, but the lack of synchronicity in timing, deadlines, and process between public and private schools created a lot of confusion and frustration for those families.

Thoughts on the new assignment policy. With regard to the policy change in general, from intra-district choice to assignment school (with limited choice), all the parents understood and even supported, theoretically, the new policy. They could, as Netu said, *"understand the idea behind it."* For Sasha there was even some sense of "*relief*" with the new policy and some clarity in having a neighborhood school *"versus having the whole universe of schools to pick*

from." Reagan thought *"it is a good policy. I think kids should go to school in their neighborhood. I think it builds a sense of community."* But she could *"see how it would be bad if you lived in a bad neighborhood."* Netu agreed with that sentiment; she said she would be *"fine with the decision"* if all the schools had *"been improved enough,"* but, by her account, that had not yet happened and the policy had therefore disadvantaged some and advantaged those *"who live in well-to-do areas."*

Harry felt that not only did those families have the advantage of having a great neighborhood school, but they also had a huge advantage in the choice game: *"they can really shoot for the stars when they go to their choice schools because they have the fall-, their fallback option is great."*

This left some parents, particularly Libby, Harry, Susan, and Netu, thinking about *"how to play the game"* as Libby described it:

> *I think we're trying to understand how to play the game. I mean, I think it feels a little bit like there's got to be some sort of strategy in the way that you list your schools. And so what is that true strategy? And then how do we get the strategy and like understand it and nobody else does? You know, similar to like poker.*

She and Harry spent a lot of time thinking about how to "play the odds" so they could end up with their top choice:

> *Let's say we put our first choice as Williams or Davidson Park, right? And somebody living in Mission View neighborhood puts Davidson Park as their first choice. And then our second choice, we put as Williams, right? I mean, once you, just because you don't get your first choice, you're not going have a higher percentage chance of getting your second choice. So living in a bad neighborhood*

then, you're-, you're actually handicapped because if you shoot for the very top

schools, you have just as little chance of anyone else. But then you have a lesser

chance of getting your second or third choices, if you rank them as your second

and third choice.

Susan "played the game" in a different way. When she first learned about the new policy,

she felt like she "*had to do something*" because of what she knew about the poor performance of

her neighborhood school. So, she heard about an opening at Hackley, which is both a preschool

and a K–5 school. They got in and got a scholarship, and she and her husband decided "*this will*

be our backup plan" for kindergarten.

Conclusion

This policy context created a very specific type of search environment for a particular

type of active chooser—one who was generally aware of the all of the available options and

motivated and resourced enough to take advantage of them. Despite this motivation, as well as

the connections to preschool and moms' networks, these choosers found themselves somewhat

adrift when it came to identifying their school preferences and finding the preferences they

sought through the available channels; they relied on a broad range of proxies to judge schools.

Further, most parents' preferences shifted and were shaped by the process itself as they

questioned not only what they wanted but what, in essence, kindergarten was for.

The next chapter, which builds on the ways women use their networks to gather school

information, discusses the findings as they relate more specifically to gender, the maternal role in

the choosing process, and family decision making.

Chapter 6

The Decision-Making Process of Women and Families

In the previous chapter, I presented findings related to parental preferences, information seeking and networks, and Seattle school district policy. Some of those findings, like the use of mom networks, hinted at the ways women in this study were at the center of school choosing and the way choosing was connected with broader issues. Susan, for example, found herself in an "*online brawl*" with other mothers who were upset because they disliked her negativity about the neighborhood school. They called her "*part of the problem*," perceiving Susan's desire to opt out of the school part of the reason for its problems. They were rallying to get Susan and other parents in the neighborhood to choose the neighborhood school. This chapter looks closely at interplay, such as this, between women's and families' choosing and broader social structures and constructs.

The women in this study did not choose schools in a vacuum; their choosing was shaped by and part of broader concerns – familial, social, and moral. While educational preferences and school characteristics were important, they were not the only driving factors for families, who grappled with myriad other familial concerns about the home-school transition, finances, jobs, parenting values, work, and larger concerns like race, class, and the nature of education. Women negotiated these issues on behalf of their families. Managing the school search activities caused stress and impacted their personal and professional lives as they juggled the day-to-day logistics and ongoing debates with their partners. This school-choice work appeared to be part of the way these women were engaged in seeking advantages for their children and advancing (or maintaining) family status.

This chapter includes a discussion of the ways the women's participation in search activities were impacted by their work and vice versa. It also includes findings about how the transition to kindergarten is an important time for mothers in relation to their children and the way this transition impacted school choosing. The chapter also explores intra-family debate and how parents discussed and weighed differing opinions and familial concerns. Then it discusses "dilemmas of choosing": the untidy way race, class, neighborhood, and communitarian and individualistic values and personal experiences overlapped in mothers' thinking about the best school for their child. Finally, it analyzes the way social class status seemed to shape mothers' thinking about schools and it looks at the emotional trajectory of the choosing process.

School Choice as Women's Work

Before looking more closely at women's role in choosing, I want to explain that terms like *stay-at-home* or *part-time* or *full-time* do not adequately explain the relationship these women have to their own work. Many of the women considered their relationship to their work/employment status temporary or shifting. Netu, a married mother of one daughter, is an excellent example of this. During the course of the interviews, Netu was staying at home and managing her daughter's schooling and activities, including looking for kindergartens, though she did have a freelance web-design business that ebbs and flows based on her commitments to family work. Part way through the choosing process she described how her own work had "lost momentum" because she'd been doing "a little bit more housework. Getting the house ready, on the market." She and her husband were selling their house to move north of the Ship Canal for schools. Once all of that work was done, she was "going to get back to" her work and "get back on track." So, while I use standard categories such as *part-time* to describe the women's work, these are fluid categories related to women's domestic labor and work on behalf of their families.

Women took on the bulk of the school-choice work for a variety of reasons. Regardless of the reasons, the management of the activities created stress and logistical challenges that constrained their choosing. As they investigated schools, most of the women thought about the ways particular school choices would impact their own work and lives as their children transitioned to kindergarten.

Mothers' time commitment to choosing. Among the interview participants, two of the eight women considered herself to be sharing the burden of school choosing equally with her husband or partner. For the three women working part-time or staying at home, this was mostly related to time and the natural division of labor that already existed in the family. Netu described her husband's participation this way: *"He's definitely, he's letting me do the research…because he, obviously, doesn't have the time."* Helene, who works part-time as a nurse practitioner and clinical nursing instructor, echoed Netu: *"So my—, my husband is very interested in participating in this, as well. He just-, he doesn't have as much time. He's actually done some reading on the subject, more than I have, though. And by reading, I mean, like he's more philosophical."* Helene continued: *"I don't know that he's given it much additional thought. I mean, if I were to spur him on and say, 'We need to look at this,' or something like that, I think at that point he'll look. But otherwise, he's leaving it up to me."* For these women, who stay home, in part, to take care of their children and the home, the work of looking at schools fell squarely in their domain and the pre-existing division of labor.

Anna, who was working part-time but looking for full-time work, struggled to get her daughter's father, from whom she is divorced, fully engaged in the process. Regarding his attendance at schools tours, she said *"No, he couldn't because he works full time. He wanted to.*

He was going to come to one of them but he couldn't.'' She went on to say that despite her

equally busy schedule, she ended up bearing much of the burden of the school choice work:

> *I'm just kind of leaving it up to him to take the tours. I gave him some dates; we*
>
> *created like a calendar at one point. As usual I feel like I'm the caretaker, you*
>
> *know, and he has to do it. I'm a little preoccupied; you know, doing what I have*
>
> *to do. Spending more time with Lily when I'm not working and trying to find a job*
>
> *and my mom is really ill too.*

For some of the other women, the reasons for playing a lead role had to do with feeling

like they wanted to see the schools and learn about them from a particular vantage point. Libby,

for example, who shared the school choice work equally with her husband, an educator, sent

"him out as like the feeler first because I think that he comes at it from a . . . an educator's

perspective, and really looking and asking certain things,'' whereas she perceived herself to be

"*more emotional*" and wondering about her son's safety and well-being and less about

educational theory.

Similarly, Reagan, who was a full-time student, sent her partner to one open house and

"he didn't come back with a lot of information, which was disappointing." She resolved to

attend the tours and open houses for "*her own peace of mind*" and because she said, she needs

"to see it for myself. I can't take AJ's word for it. I'm a very 'see it for myself' kind of person in

every aspect of my life. I have to get my own vibe, my own feelings from a place."

All of the women reported that the school-choosing activities came with significant

consequences to their own lives and schedules, whether it was because they needed it to see it for

themselves, were doing the work due to a partner's lack of time or, like Libby, were sharing the

activities but fitting them into a busy work and family schedule. The activities they engaged in—

web research, school visits, tours, open houses, and conversations with friends, family, and

partners—were extensive. They all talked about managing calendars, scheduling tours, missing

work, and feeling stressed. Helene, for example, early in the choice process, described herself as

being "*a little frazzled. There's all this coming up, to manage work and all your other*

commitments and these school tours, which are kind of wibbly-wobbly all over the calendar."

This commitment of time and hours impacted all the women's lives during the choice

process, constrained their ability to seek information and investigate possibilities, and caused

stress in their personal and work/school lives. All of the women expressed that they did fewer

tours or curtailed their searches in some way due to constraints. Those with more constraints

struggled with those trade-offs the most, as Reagan, Anna, and Susan's experiences exemplify.

Reagan, a student whose partner, AJ, is a Metro bus driver, wished he would be more

involved to relieve some of her stress and frustration:

> *I wish AJ could take care of some of the bureaucracy because it's hard for me to*
>
> *keep track of all of that plus school when I'm taking care of the kids now….All the*
>
> *paperwork and everything. He does do the taking it to the school but I have to be*
>
> *on top of the deadlines and it's just like 10 more things that I have to manage. It's*
>
> *just frustrating.*

Further, she had to manage her course load and class schedule, which had numerous conflicts

with the tour times and dates:

> *I'm going to have to miss a lot of class, however, because [the tours] are from*
>
> *like 9:30–11:30, which is pretty much peak time for me with school, so I'm really*
>
> *hoping I can get my professors to be okay with me not being in class. I'm going to*
>
> *email them all way in advance. I'm just praying they think it's a good enough*

>*reason to send me the lecture notes because then I don't get behind too much,*
>
>*especially for my one economics class. That one is really disconcerting.*

When asked if she would still go on the tours if the professors balked at allowing the absences,

she said "*Yeah, I guess. I'm really hoping…they are both mothers, so they understand the*

importance of what I'm doing." When I asked her if she had done all of the tours she had hoped

to, she replied,

>*I did not do them all. Yeah… I had to bail on a couple…I still want to do them but*
>
>*I think I'm going to try to hit them up in March. There's a couple I can do in*
>
>*March. I can do Ellington in March and Langley in March. I'm going to check*
>
>*those out. I decided not to check out Liston, period. I have to hedge my bets and*
>
>*that one's just not going to work…it's been really a rough quarter.*

Anna, who was job-hunting at the same time as looking at schools, ultimately had to

decide to which endeavor she would devote more time. In early February she decided she needed

to make her SPS school choice list based on what she had done to that point (and what she had

heard from others): "*I'm kind of inclined to put those [schools] on the list and just– just from*

word of mouth because I'm kind of toured out. I've sort of hit the– the– do I spend my time trying

to find a job?"

Susan, who was working multiple jobs, was also constrained by the amount of time she

had to devote to the process:

>*I think if I were a stay-at-home mom or something, not to say a stay-at-home mom*
>
>*has loads of free time. I mean, they're busy, too, but . . . maybe I could . . . I don't*
>
>*know. Maybe I–, I just would have more time to . . . investigate deeply and more*
>
>*deeply and get–, get a better sense of these schools. You know, I'm going to have*

to make a decision without as much information as I probably would really like to

have.

All the women, stay-at-home or working, were heavily engaged in managing the school choice

activities on behalf of their children. Even Libby and Trina, who shared the work with their

partners, felt stressed by the magnitude of the hours and effort. Ultimately those women with

more constraints—school, work, unemployment, divorce—were the ones less able to pursue

search activities to their satisfaction.

School transition and women's work. The entry into kindergarten changes a mother's

relationship with her child. Rather than being the primary care-taker (or primarily concerned

with negotiating care-taking), women will share this role with the school (Ribbens, 1993).

Kindergarten school choice is therefore a harbinger of a period of transition for them; the

beginning of full-time school creates an opportunity for women to change their relationship to

their own work and balance (or re-balance) their personal/professional needs with the needs of

their child or children. Preschool, as discussed in the previous chapter, typically caters to

parents' needs as well as children's, with long hours and few days off, for example. K–12

education offers less in the way of flexibility and accommodations of the family's work

schedules. So, on the one hand, women have some more freedom to fill the school hours; on the

other, they have to contend with the constraints of the school hours and other K–12 expectations.

Except for Trina, all the women grappled with how the start of kindergarten would offer them

new ways to think about their own work—more hours to work or more time for themselves—for

example. The constraints they wrestled with were primarily financial and logistical, as they

wondered how a particular school choice would increase (or decrease) the burden on them as

bread winner, chauffer, classroom volunteer, or child advocate and supporter.

Anna, who had struggled with the demands of single motherhood since her child was an infant, found the transition to kindergarten offering some hope for her financially. However, it also meant she needed to find a school with a good extended care programs if she wanted to find full-time work for herself:

> *It'll be a relief if we could just be in just one place all day. Because right now it's total – craziness. So if we can find somewhere that has before and after school care, I'm sure we'll be using that. I'll be able to work full-time and catch up a little – because I've been really kind of scraping along. I feel kind of underappreciated, like her dad doesn't realize that's a factor. He's working full-time and I've been working part-time since she was born. And it's been hard to scrape along.*

Anna was both anxious and excited about "turning a new page" as she started working full-time again, and she and her daughter were looking forward to *"the first of our next 13 years in the system."*

Libby's job, at a technology company in Bellevue, weighed on her thinking about school in two particular ways: proximity and finances. Having Jackson go to their neighborhood school, with which she was not particularly enamored, would make her commute and their morning routines much easier:

> *Yeah, I think, quite honestly, the only thing that I'm probably wrestling with is just the ease of having the school in our backyard pretty much, and trying to figure out how will we organize our lives for Williams because it's not easy to get there from here. Especially if then I have to go over to Bellevue, which I would probably have to take 520 if I wanted to drive, which seems crazy.*

Libby was also considering the option of having her son stay at his private preschool for K–5 or

at least kindergarten, but the thought of the financial burden weighed heavily on her, in part,

because she had been laid off in the recent past. In that regard, public school felt like a much

safer bet:

> *I think both of us just work a lot and it would be so nice to feel like we weren't*
>
> *going broke. Like, 'how's that going to work this month?' You know? We would*
>
> *just feel like we'd have a cushion and I also think being laid off, for me, in the*
>
> *past, I still have a little bit of a . . . you know, whatever, post-traumatic, too. It's*
>
> *because now I know it can happen. Where, it's like, 'Oh, it happens to those poor*
>
> *people… But it happens to everybody.'*

Reagan grappled with these similar constraints—of proximity and finances—and they were

squarely related to her work and her choices in the coming years:

> *I'm in love with Rosa Parks but it's so far for us to drive. I would have to drive*
>
> *him all the way up [North] every day. And [his sister] is at preschool at 8:30 and*
>
> *then he's there at 9:10. What a nightmare! Do I really want to do that? I thought*
>
> *I wanted to get a job, not drive around all day…but [the school] looks awesome.*
>
> *It looks really awesome.*

As Reagan neared her own college graduation, the selection of which school Jason would attend

mingled with her career aspirations and desire, as a mother, to provide a great experience for and

accommodate her son's needs.

Netu was in the process of starting her own business. She was doing some *pro bono*

website design for Lily's dance studio to build her experience. She talked excitedly about the

possibility of having more time to dedicate to her work once Lily was in full-time school: *"I do*

enjoy doing-, having something of my own, too, it's kind of nice. You know, it's good. Yeah [laughs] to keep me active and engaged." But Netu also projected that if they chose a school or ended up at a school where she felt like she had to supplement the academic pieces of the curriculum (which she felt like she would have to do most places), that would impact her ability to take on more work and have more of an impact on her life than on her husband, Mike: *"I'm going to be the one that's going to be volunteering more than Mike. I'm going be the one that's there, you know… helping out and that takes all my extra time."*

When thinking about schools, all of the women, except for Trina, were contemplating how their needs and their balance of mothering and working fit with the school choices. Sasha knew that if she went back to work in her high-powered advertising career, her family could afford to send Lucas to "*pretty much any school.*" However, it was unclear to her what was more important: having a mom stay at home or going to "*the best school.*" These work/life/school tensions weighed on women as they struggled to identify not just the "best school" but what was "best" for their families, writ large.

From the start, during the search process, school choice was intertwined with the women's lives as they sought to manage the demands of choosing. Women's thinking about how a school "fits" with their own lives reflects the notion that women are the primary participants in and negotiators of a child's schooling (Brantlinger, 2003; David, Hughes, & Ribbens, 1993;Reay, 1998). School choice is the beginning of years of work on behalf of the child's education.

Women and Intra-Family Decisions

Figuring out what would best for their families meant the women were in constant negotiation with their husbands or partners about the choice. While most women did the bulk of

the work, choosing a school was not a unilateral decision. I had hoped to get a clearer sense of what the conversations and negotiations with their partners or spouses were like, but because I didn't observe the actual spousal/partner conversations, I had only a glimpse of the tenor, texture, and substance of these discussions.

In general, the pattern of intra-family negotiation that was reported to me involved one parent, typically but not always the mother, going on a tour or doing research or having a conversation with a friend and then debriefing that experience with the child's other parent. What I learned about these conversations reflected Curtis's suggestion (1986), with regard to research on families, to recognize the individuals within the family while also recognizing them as embedded or "organized" within households. So, the women brought their own insights, information, and preferences from their school-choice activities into conversation and negotiation with their partners. Together, they negotiated the ways education or a particular school fit with their overall family values and priorities.

For Libby and her husband Harry, the debriefing conversations were daily and difficult: "*Yeah, we talk about it all the time. Like it's . . . so, I think the other night we talked about it and to a place where it got Harry frustrated and he couldn't talk anymore…so our conversations, so I think they're very hard. I think it's hard for us to kind of think outside of the next eight months, you know*."

Trina and her partner talked *"every night about it – they're fights, really [laughs]."* The fights were generally based around Trina's high expectations and her constantly saying *"I'm not a fan of this school, I'm not a fan."* To which her partner constantly wondered, "*OK, so which school are you a fan of?"*

Susan described her "debriefing" with her husband as somewhat less conflictual though following a similar pattern: *"I say I went on this tour, and he'll say, 'How was it?' And we'll probably have a five-minute (conversation). I don't really go into all the details back and forth because, I think, at the end of the day, you know, that I'll make the decision and it–, and he's totally confident that whatever decision I make is the right one."*

For Reagan and her partner, the conversations were also daily and sometimes heated, usually about money and their ability to possibly afford private school:

> *Because one of the main things that bothers me about Easton besides the price*
>
> *is that… because I'm the one who pays the bills. I'm the one who balances the*
>
> *budget. I'm the one who does all that, so I know that we can't… we can't*
>
> *afford it, flat out. Even if they gave us 50%, we still wouldn't be able to afford*
>
> *it. There's just no way unless we ran through all our savings and that would*
>
> *be in one year.*

Moving house. Reagan and AJ also talked about moving, which was the most common parental conversation reported to me. As couples tried to balance their desire for proximity and a neighborhood school and affordability, moving to a different Seattle neighborhood, or another city with a better schooling option, was on the table for five of the eight families. This represents the ways in which school choosing is integrally connected to other aspects of a family's life. The constant negotiation was not just about which *school* was better but which *notion* was more important or preferable: moving to a different neighborhood or driving across town to school, paying for private school or saving for college. The discussions were about those trade-offs.

Throughout the interview process, for example, Netu was readying her house to go on the market, in large part due to her desire to have better schooling options for Lily. She and her

husband were *"in agreement about putting our house on the market and selling it and moving north of the Ship Canal . . . for schools."* For them, that brought a new set of constraints, like having to downsize or rent because they might not "be able to afford a house." And it meant a "major upheaval" for her as she had to ready their current home for the market and look at a much wider range of schools across the whole city to determine which neighborhood they wanted to move to. Similarly Susan and her husband had *"all kinds of conversations about do we really want to move, just like maybe even putting numbers down on paper, like a cost benefit of like a house payment versus a school payment. And, you know, trying to quantify all the things that would go into a decision about moving."*

Reagan's husband AJ colorfully described how their negotiations involved trying to understand how school fit into the overall picture of their family's choices, including their desire to move out of subsidized housing and eventually own a home:

> *There are so many long-term things…we're like a dog circling where they're going to poop because we don't know exactly where yet. If we choose Easton or Langley, it means we're not going to buy house in Tacoma or Everett or Renton. So does that mean we stay here and stay renters? Or do we try to get in while the market's down? Is the market going to continue to go down? Is the house a good investment? You know, and yada, yada, yada. All of those things are like also connected to this whole thing. What's the most important thing for the family?*

His question, *What is the most important thing for the family?* succinctly characterizes the way intra-family negotiations about school do not just involve detailing what each person liked about a school tour. They involve the kind of conversations and negotiations that shape a

family's sense of what is most important to them and how they can make the best decisions to get there, as Libby described:

> *You want to do so much the right way for your kids. Harry had a conversation with somebody at his school who chose to go to the public school route and had been in the private school world. And then they were just talking about like the money that they now have to be able to go and enjoy family vacations and how their every month isn't stressed to figure out how to make ends meet. Not like, should we live in the car, not, but more like, do we want to go out tonight for dinner, or no, we should probably stay home. Those kinds of conversations. So they're all kind of like not too tough problems to have, but the stressful kind of marital and cohesion issues that can get in the way.*

Women and Dilemmas of Choice

Beyond "what does this school mean for my kid or my schedule or my job or our house," many of the women also asked themselves "What does this school choice say about my values?" "What am I signifying to others that I believe if I make this choice?" and, even more profoundly, "What do I believe?" – about school, schooling, race, community. All the women "played around" with issues of race, class, and the nature and purpose of schooling to some degree. These issues are, on the one hand, tangential to the academic components of the school, but, on the other hand, they are core to what it means to be "choosing" and, arguably, core to understanding how families understand the basic definitions of *education* and *schooling*. Wilson called these normative questions about school choice "dilemmas of choosing." She asserted that these tensions

> are largely invisible in current research and policy on school choice. The
>
> normative conflicts and dilemmas of school choice are privatized, consigned to

privileging individual choice and aggregate outcomes, we may discount a

potentially powerful area of inquiry: the normative dimensions of choice. (2010,

p. 45)

I found these dilemmas of choosing to be of the utmost importance to the women I interviewed. I

have identified three particular ways the women held up their choices for normative

examination: in the context of their neighborhood/community, in the context of class, and as a

question about whether they believe schooling is a public or a private good.

Neighborhood: why do I live here? All of the parents who participated in the

interviews were considering their neighborhood school as well as other schools including

private, parochial, and public option schools (as described in Chapter 3). All but two of the

women talked about feeling guilty or "struggling" with the notion of not committing to the

neighborhood school. For them something was lost by NOT choosing the local public school,

though it was hard for the women to articulate. Helene, who was leaning towards a small private

school, wondered, *"Am I giving up on the public option?… I struggle with that a lot for some*

reason and I'm not quite sure why." She continued,

> *Some of it is like I love the idea of her going to school with her friends. You know,*
>
> *the ones that live right next door. We have two girls on our same block who will*
>
> *be entering kindergarten with us now, right? And wouldn't it be lovely if they*
>
> *were all three going to the same school, in a community… I love the idea of going*
>
> *to our neighborhood school with other kids that she's developed a relationship*
>
> *with already. And that's kind of the one sadness I have about it.*

The sadness seemed connected to a loss of community and sense of connection to one's neighborhood and neighbors, though Helene struggled to understand exactly what she was "giving up."

Anna described her ex-husband as having similar feelings: "*He went to school in his neighborhood and I think that's the way it was with him. The same group of friends that he stuck with all the way through—I didn't have that… So he's worried kind of about the neighborhood—maintaining the neighborhood feel that she has—she's had after five years.*" As Anna described, these dilemmas of choosing were often fueled by and had their genesis in the personal experiences of the parents. For Anna, who was bussed to her school, she never considered a sense of "loss" by not attending a school close to her home.

Helene's feelings of "sadness" about not sending her daughter, Blanca, to the neighborhood school were influenced by her own positive personal experiences:

> *I went to our neighborhood school with all my little friends and we all walked together and . . . And I just think, to a certain degree, I feel like I'm giving up on that…I don't know, I mean, there's a certain elitist factor that I struggle with a little bit. So. . . but at the same point, I go back again on like, what do I want for Blanca? What kind of development do I want to see for her? What kind of opportunities do I see for her?*

Her struggle between the community and what she wants for Blanca—which played out in the back and forth of her thinking—characterized the struggle for half of the women, who perceived their non-neighborhood choice as "elitist" or at the very least more individualistic, based on "what I want for my child" as opposed to what might feel like a more communitarian and inclusive choice.

While all of the women, except Trina and Anna, explicitly struggled with these values tensions to a certain degree, the experiences of Libby, Reagan, and Susan demonstrate the weight and nuance of this three-way tug-of-war between their personal experiences, their hopes and values for their community (or what it means to live in a community/neighborhood), and their more individualistic hopes and fears for their child.

Personal dilemmas and the nature of schooling. For Reagan and Susan, looking at schools outside their assignment school separated them from their neighborhood and brought with it tension, even during the choosing process. Reagan was friendly with many of the women in her apartment complex who had children the same age. Most of the women were unaware that there was an option to choose, and Reagan felt "concerned" because she hadn't had a chance to talk with a mother who recently found out that Reagan was applying to a private school for Jason. When the mother found out, she expressed interest in applying for her child, but it was well past the deadline and Reagan felt somewhat culpable for the mother's lack of knowledge and guilty about her own choice to do something different from everyone else in her building.

Similarly Susan found the issue of whether she would send Jenna to the neighborhood school to be "intensely divisive in the neighborhood," as described in the previous chapter. She lamented having to "give secret hand signals" and do a "dance" at play dates while she tried to figure out which "side" someone was on. In her neighborhood, the question "What are you thinking about schools?" was fraught with the possibility of saying something negative about the neighborhood school to the "wrong person." The political elements of the school-choice debate and the moral considerations about the purpose of schooling were alive and well in Susan's lived experience of school choosing, not just as theoretical debates.

For Reagan, being an elite outsider in her apartment building brought some guilt, but being a poor outsider at an elite independent school would potentially bring with it a whole other set of concerns. She and AJ debated what it would be like for Jason to be poor among wealthy kids and what it would be like for them to socialize with wealthy parents. When a parent in an interview told Reagan and AJ that nobody would notice the class difference, AJ called her out on it. Reagan recalled him saying "*We see posters outside of kids who went to Machu Pichu for summer vacation. Our kids are going to be going to zoo camp. So there are going to be differences when we drop our kids off at their house for play dates*." And again later when the issue came up about whether anyone would "know" they were on financial aid, AJ said, "*They will know as soon as they ask me what I do for work, and I say I'm a Metro bus driver*."

While AJ didn't feel like this dynamic was problematic, Reagan was less sure—based on her own experience. She grew up poor in an affluent neighborhood and never felt like she "*fit in*." She was constantly aware of a "*disparity*" between her experience and her classmates. She doesn't want that for Jason, and she worried about the values and messages he will pick up on in an affluent school:

> *I was raised in an environment where money and things equaled happiness. I was around all these people who had more money than I did. I always kind of felt like they were more happy than I was. But I just want to make sure that Jason—I don't want him to be material. I don't want him to grow up to be a consumer. I want him to be really conscious about his- I want him to grow up thinking that money and material possessions don't equal happiness.*

Regan also struggled, like Helene, with the "loss" associated with not sending her kids to a public school. She described her reaction to Jason getting into a private school as both exciting

and unsettling:

> *It was emotional when Jason got in and he got the scholarship. I felt really good. I felt really good about Jason. I thought that was pretty neat. It was like you always think your kid's pretty cool. So it's nice when somebody else does. But then immediately I kind of started to feel like a . . . I don't know, a backlash? Because I–, I–, because I do have this weird . . . thing in my head, you know, I just . . . I just, I've always wanted to raise my kid . . . I don't know how to explain it. [pause] I just didn't know that's what I wanted.*

In order to understand what it is she "*didn't know she wanted*," I pressed for more information.

> JM: *The private school part?*
>
> Reagan: *The private school part.*
>
> JM: *There's some-, some piece of you that is . . .*
>
> Reagan: *I feel like I'm giving up.*
>
> JM: *What are you giving up?*

Reagan's answer to this question is a reflection of the dilemma of choosing as it relates to the purpose of education. She wrestled with understanding schooling as a private good or a public good:

> *Well, because I feel like the public schools were, they were invented for the people, you know? And if you're not supporting the public schools, then you're giving up. You're saying it's not good enough for my kids. You know? And that makes me feel elitist, a little bit? And I know that by sending him to a private school, I'm doing what any parent would do for their kid, but at the same time, I feel like I'm giving up. Because I believe in the public school system. I want to believe in the public school system. But it's hard to believe in the public school*

> *system when they don't . . . you know, when the state government, or whoever,*
>
> *whatever part of government that takes care of the schools doesn't take care of*
>
> *the schools and doesn't concern itself enough with its students. And I think those*
>
> *individuals . . . Parents do want to, they want to believe in public education. And*
>
> *suddenly they're faced with this choice for their own kid and it's like it tests their.*
>
> *. . It tests them somehow, right?*

Susan, similarly, weighed the political and the personal as she wrestled with the public and private nature of schooling:

> *I like the idea of her going to public school but there are a lot of people and a lot of-,*
>
> *and personally, a lot of my left-wing friends who are like, you know, 'Public education is*
>
> *critical' and you know, I had my own personal education, I was split. I had half with*
>
> *public and half with private. And I definitely deep down and in my personality and who I*
>
> *am, from public schools is from the diversity. I think that plays a large part in who I*
>
> *married and who I became. But . . . but if it's my-, I know that just the fact that I got my*
>
> *Master's degree and that I'm in a research job, I mean, I know that has everything to do*
>
> *with my private school education. So I see the benefits of both.*

Diversity. Diversity was another dilemma with which all but two of the mothers wrestled. The "segregated" nature of APP—where they saw the mostly white APP students taught in classrooms in the same school with the mostly non-white general education students—was off putting to them. The racial division between classrooms at Raymond Elementary, which housed both general education and APP, was "*shocking*" to Netu and the "*black, white, black, white class*" division made her "*think you're in the South or something.*" Libby also balked at the

possibility of Jackson being in a "*segregated*" program; she viewed APP as the opposite of the "*inclusive*" preschool they loved.

For Reagan, Helene, Libby, and Netu, the choice to not go to their neighborhood school was a clear but troubling rejection of a diverse student body. Helene identified her neighborhood school, as a "*beautiful, multi-ethnic school*" that "*recognizes and supports different cultures.*" She noted, with some resignation that it will be challenging to "*foster an appreciation*" of different cultures at a school like Napoli, which she assumed would be "*pretty white.*" This tradeoff unnerved them as they tried to come to terms with both their belief in "diversity" and their rejection of their neighborhood school. Libby mused:

> *I mean, we chose to live in the neighborhood and stay in the neighborhood and raise our kids because it's a diverse neighborhood in the first place. And then I have my own personal feelings of like, well then why am I not comfortable sending my child to a diverse– . . . I don't know . . . I don't know if I want Jackson to deal with so much diversity in a public school where he's going to get left out, trampled on, or any, like all the things that you never would want for your child to have to deal with.*

On balance, Netu thought an "excellent school" would have some diversity coupled with high test scores, or at least just as high as non-diverse schools. In her equation, test scores trumped diversity.

Elements of the political and moral considerations about school choice played out in the experiences of the women choosing. They themselves grappled with their own beliefs about the nature of schooling and the importance of values like diversity and community. And the context of choosing in Seattle put them in conversations and situations in which their choice signified something larger than just a choice for their individual child. To Susan's neighbors, Susan's

choice to send Jenna to a school outside the neighborhood was not just a choice about Jenna but a choice signifying a rejection of communal values and civic responsibility.

Anxiety and Calm

Given the depth of consideration and the amount of tension wound up in these decisions, it is not surprising that feelings of anxiety were rampant for all the mothers. Previous work has suggested that maternal anxiety stems, in part, from the moral and structural constraints in choice making (David et al., 1997; Himmelwitt & Sigala, 2004; Simopulous & Grave, 1984). I found this to be true. All of the women expressed anxiety about many of the constraints discussed above: making it to tours, remembering deadlines, negotiating the public school policies. Helene, for instance, described some angst that occurred when a neighbor stopped by and "*was mentioning something*" about schools. Helene suddenly thought, "*What? What should I be doing? And it's freaking me out a little bit and I feel like I'm behind the gun. And I remember somebody saying last year, 'Do your looking now, when it's still a year out for you, because you don't want to make this decision under pressure.'*"

Mothers were also anxious about their child's and family's future: the uncertainty of what the following year would look like, whether they would move, whether they would be financially strapped, whether their child would be "bored" or "lost" in his or her new school. Layer all of that with the value tensions in play and the negotiation of the moral, political, and personal, and *anxiety* almost seems like too meek a term. Trina expressed a high state of anxiety: "*this is kindergarten, for Christ sakes! You know? Gosh, I can't imagine what's going to happen when she's in high school, you know? And that's one of the things. I'm anxious. Like, if I'm this anxious at kindergarten…*" She trailed off imagining the magnitude of her future anxiety.

Calm after the Storm. However, perhaps the most striking aspect of the heightened anxiety was that it went away. In the end, sometimes before the final decision was made and sometimes after, all mothers expressed feeling calm and like everything "*would be okay*." Sasha described getting to the point where she understood

> *that no matter what choice we have, or no matter what choice we make, there's going to be positives and negatives. We can take our life savings and decide to go to Fairvalley, you know, there's going to be some serious pretentious behavior and things that will be challenging there. And if we decide to go to Woodford, there's going be challenges wherever we are, and we just have to know that we are good parents and that he'll be OK. Like, I have to get to that point where I just . . . regardless of what choice I make, I have to have faith that it's just going to be the way it is, and he'll be OK.*

Anna came to the same conclusion about Ever: *"She's going to be fine. Whatever we decide – and we can make changes. You know, if she really hates it or it's not a good fit, she'll be fine."* Trina went a step further, recognizing that all of her anxiety was "creating a monster" out of the search process: *"But it's kindergarten. And how much damage can a kindergarten teacher do? So she's going to be OK."* She continued that most of the things she worried about was "*adult stuff like diversity*" and then she *"looked around at the people we have in her life, who we intentionally have in her life"* and realized *"the kid could go to an all-Martian school and she's still going to be OK."*

This calmness is notable for a number of reasons. First, as discussed earlier, many surveys about choice are retrospective; they ask parents to reflect upon the process and try and recall what was important to them and how they made their decisions. The parents in this study

were in a strikingly different place at the end of the process than they were during the process.
What they talked about, how they felt, and what was important to them had shifted considerably.

Second, research findings suggest that parents are satisfied with schools of choice
(Walberg, 2007). Parents may, in the end, be calm and have come to a resolution with their
choice, but that doesn't mean that they are satisfied with choosing or even that they got their first
choice. Many of these mothers wished they lived somewhere else – where they wouldn't have to
choose, where the local neighborhood school was fine. As Susan said regarding her feelings
about choosing,

> *It's a huge bummer. I mean, there's nothing; there's nothing fun about it. I mean, I'm so*
> *desperately envious of my friends who are in the North End, you know. There's a great*
> *school across the street from them. And they don't even like give a second thought, you*
> *know? When their kids get to be kindergarten age, they go there. And they're happy with*
> *it and it's great, and everything's just idyllic.*

Similarly Netu envied her *"friends on the east side or on Mercer Island that say, 'Ah, you*
just go your neighborhood school and you're done.' And it's just no real decision making."
Perhaps satisfied parents are satisfied because they have been through a process whereby they
realize, like Sasha, that they *"just do the best (they) can"* and, like Netu, that nothing is perfect:
"*I definitely am feeling less anxious about it and I know that once we're in the Seattle Public*
School System, it's not going to be perfect. I'm going to have to try and make sure I can always
work with the teacher and talk to the teacher. You know, and kind of make sure that I'm there, as
much as possible."

Women, Choice, and Class

As noted in Chapter 2, a number of studies have found that class makes a difference in the way school choice is negotiated and acted upon (Bell, 2008; Reay & Ball, 1998; Stambach & David, 2005). Reay and Ball (1998) contended that "class, gender and race all contribute significantly to the ways choice is played out within families….different conceptions of childhood and understandings of what it means to be a child largely run in tandem with other social class trends" (p. 432), This has been supported by other literature on class and childhood. Brantlinger (2003), Blair-Loy (2003), and Lareau (2003), for example, all described the ways in which middle-class women are likely to construct childhood – including its schooling components – as a time when children are fragile and need protection and cultivation.

All except one of the families interviewed fell into the category of *middle class*. And all of them, even the working class family, talked of childhood as time of concerted cultivation and conveyed a sense that choosing the right school was part of what it means to keep a child moving forward. Little of this was explicitly stated by parents, but a common language ran through many of interviews that spoke to a sense of advancement, striving, and a need to cultivate.

The default language mothers used for explaining the need to have a child advancing, growing, and cultivated was a concern that their child not become "bored" as described in the previous chapter. The cure for the possibility of boredom in most cases was parental "supplementing." While Libby was not that concerned with Jackson's academic progress in Kindergarten, per se, because *"he's pretty earnest, focused, pretty solid,"* she did think there were some schools that wouldn't stimulate him enough and she was *"a little bit more worried about whether or not he'd just be bored"* in certain schools. Even Netu, who was convinced kindergarten is purely for socialization, added *"but then if it's not challenging enough and she's*

getting bored, then we're going to have to supplement." And Reagan was worried that Jason would get bored or that "the teachers will have their hands full with so many other students that he will get pushed to the background."

Eschewing the prospect of natural growth, these choosers wanted to ensure that their children were challenged—that there would be forward momentum on their academic journey. For many, if they chose a school with what they deemed to be less than an acceptable amount of academic focus, they would supplement. Seven of the eight mothers described some way in which they were considering supplementing as part of the school choice process. Supplementing appeared to mean parental provision of either academic or extracurricular activities to ensure that the children were sufficiently challenged and enriched. The mothers viewed supplementing as their work and even weighed their ability to supplement as part of the school-choosing equation.

Sasha, for example, who was weighing whether to go back to work so that her son could attend a private school or stay at home and have him attend a public school made elaborate plans for supplementing as part of her school-choosing activities. She "fell in love" with the science program at a private school, so as she was facing the financial reality that a public school might be more feasible, she described how she could "*supplement whatever it is that you do at Puget Sound or at Williams with other science projects and interests.*" She researched a program offered by Boeing starting in first grade and contacted a local artist who made *papier mache* spaceships to see if she can commission him to help her son make a car he had been designing and saving for.

Netu felt like she was "*going in circles*" because she saw her search as having two possible ends: 1) Lily was in a less academic environment and Netu would "*try and help and supplement,*" or 2) Lily was in a *"very good school"* and Netu would be able to relinquish some

of her supporting roles. Through the search process, she came to understand that *"even if she went to a very good school, even if she was in APP, I would still have to help and supplement and volunteer and do all those things* anyway.*"* For most parents, part of the ability to feel calm, discussed above, and as if their children were going to "be okay" was fueled by the notion that whatever was missing—diversity, academic challenge, extracurriculars—could be supplemented.

Conclusion

This notion that mothers' school-choice work might be tied to a desire to advance their child's and family's interests is, at least in part, intuitive: parents want the best for their children. Schooling is both a private, individualistic good and a public one. The extent to which these mothers thought about advancement in terms of dis-advantaging others is unclear. Unlike mothers' in the Blair Loy (2007) and Brantlinger (2007) studies described earlier, the mothers in this study did not speak about dis-advantaging others. On the contrary, as described in detail above, they spoke with concern about what impact their choices might have on the common good. I do think, however, it is important to put the mothers' school choice work and anxiety in the same light as these notions of cultivation and advancement – at the intersection of gender and class. Seen that way, the school-choice work is not necessarily only a product of the process itself but of the intentions and aspirations that women bring to it. Cooper (2005, 2007), Reay (1998), David, et al., (1994), and Ribbens (1993) found that ALL women, of all classes and levels of educational attainment, bear the burden of school choosing, but perhaps the different reasons for choosing give a different tenor to the process itself.

Chapter 7

Survey Findings

The quantitative findings come from a survey taken by parents who were touring public and private schools in Seattle in the winter of 2011. The purpose of that survey was to understand the school choice process: who is involved and what it entails. The survey instrument was developed using some new items and some previously validated items from four questionnaires, including a questionnaire developed by Schneider (2002) designed to examine parents' wishes for their children's education and a questionnaire developed by Weiher (2002), which examined whether school choice leads to racially distinctive schools.

The newly created items were informed by previous qualitative work described as part of this study's conceptual frame (see Appendix C). As described in detail in Chapter 4, the new questionnaire items were intended to address some of the epistemological concerns raised in previous surveys and to illuminate some of the limitations and blind spots in those surveys to the extent that a quantitative instrument can do so. In summary, the limitations the survey intended to address were a) the retrospective nature of previous surveys; b) the lack of clarity about who was taking the survey, and c) the ambiguity about the construct of academic quality. This survey was given *during* the decision-making process when participants could more readily access their attitudes and behavior regarding school choosing. This survey asked specifically about the respondent's relationship with the child, and there were other questions intended to elicit information about choosing roles within the family. This survey differentiated types of academic quality that parents could be looking for in order to better understand what is important to them.

While the initial aim of the survey was to describe and compare women's and men's preferences, activities, and attitudes related to school choice, as noted earlier, not enough men

participated in the survey to make this a feasible analysis. I was able to meet the other aims of

analyzing demographic and other factors predictive of choosing certain types of schools and

understanding parental knowledge of and reaction to district policy. Further, I was able to look at

differences in women's attitudes and participation based on their demographics and work status.

Using findings from the qualitative data about the importance of preschools, I analyzed the data

to understand the way in which preschool might impact school choice.

This chapter reviews the survey sample and recruitment and respondent demographics.

Next it describes results related to school-choosing activities: who is doing them, how much

time they spend on it, and how those activities are linked with other variables. Finally, it presents

descriptive results related to the school characteristics of most importance to families.

Sample, Recruitment, and Demographics

As noted earlier, this study took place in Seattle during the second year of a new district-

wide school assignment policy that automatically assigned students to their neighborhood school.

Parents who did not want their children to attend the neighborhood school (or who were

gathering information about the neighborhood school and others) were considered active

choosers. The target population within Seattle was active first-time kindergarten choosers.

Active choosers, as noted above, provide the best opportunity for addressing the research

questions. By looking only at first-time choosers, I removed the concerns and variables created

by having a sibling enrolled at a school. At the time of the study, I estimated the target

population to be about 1,950 families. The details of this estimate are spelled out in Chapter 4.

The sampling frame included attendees at private, public, and option school tours in the

winter of 2011. As described in Chapter 4, the survey sample was intended to be a stratified

cluster sample (Groves, Fowler, Couper, Lepkowski, Singer, & Tourangeau, 2004) but various

limitations prevented me from executing the recruitment plan. Ultimately the sample was a strategic but non-representative sample of 70 active first time choosers.

Participant demographics. 76 families responded to the survey and 72 were valid respondents. Four cases were discarded because they didn't meet the eligibility requirements: first-time chooser and Seattle resident. Two were imputed for conflicting responses, leaving 70 cases for analysis. Following is demographic information about the respondents compared with the general Seattle population (statistics about the target population are not available).

Table 4.

Survey Respondent Demographics Compared to Seattle Population

	Survey Population	Seattle Population
Gender	81% women	50% women*
Gender of child	70% boys	50% male (2005 births)*
Education level	51% graduate degree 100% some college	55% adults over 25 have college degree*
Family income	70% $40,000–$149,000	Median family income = $91,112*
Ethnicity	85% white	70% White*
Marriage status	90% married	No comparable statistic
Neighborhood	19% West Seattle 9% Roosevelt/Ravenna 7% Central District 7% Magnolia	Survey neighborhoods do not match Census neighborhoods

* U.S Census Bureau – 2011 data

This demographic profile alone provides a good deal of information about school choice in Seattle. In spite of various oversampling techniques, the survey respondents were predominantly white, married, educated women. The sample as a whole could not be labeled *affluent*; the majority were middle class, with 70% of the respondents making between $40,000

and $149,000. 100% of the children attended pre-school with 46% being in preschool for the

majority of work week hours.

The greatest percentage of respondents (35%), at that point in the search process, were

interested in having their child attend an option school. See Table 5 below. Only 11% of the

Seattle Public Schools elementary population attended an option school in 2011.

Table 5.

Type of School Respondents Would Be Most Likely to Choose at Time of Survey*

	Percentage	**N**
Options school	40%	28
Independent private school	31%	22
Neighborhood school	13%	9
Parochial School	9%	6
Other	7%	5

* Survey was given in February and March. School decisions mostly made in April.

With regard to employment status, the greatest number of parents (43%) were working

full-time; when women are accounted for alone, those doing household work (32%) and those

working full-time outside the home (33%) were about the same. See Table 6.

Table 6.

Survey Respondent Employment Status

	Mothers (n=57)	**% of Mothers**	**Fathers (n=13)**	**% of Total**
Part Time work & household work	15	26%	1	23%
Household work only	18	32%	0	26%
Full Time work outside home	19	33%	11	43%
Student	2	4%	1	4%
Other	3	5%	0	3%

School-Choice Activities: Description and Analysis

The descriptive data from the survey revealed that within families, women were primarily responsible for school choice activities. Mothers were primarily responsible 57% of the time, fathers were primarily responsible 4% of the time, and the activities were shared 40% of the time (does not equal 100% due to rounding). This means that women are primarily involved in school choice activities 97% of the time, either sharing primary responsibility or doing it alone. See Figure 2 below. This finding was also reflected in the interview data.
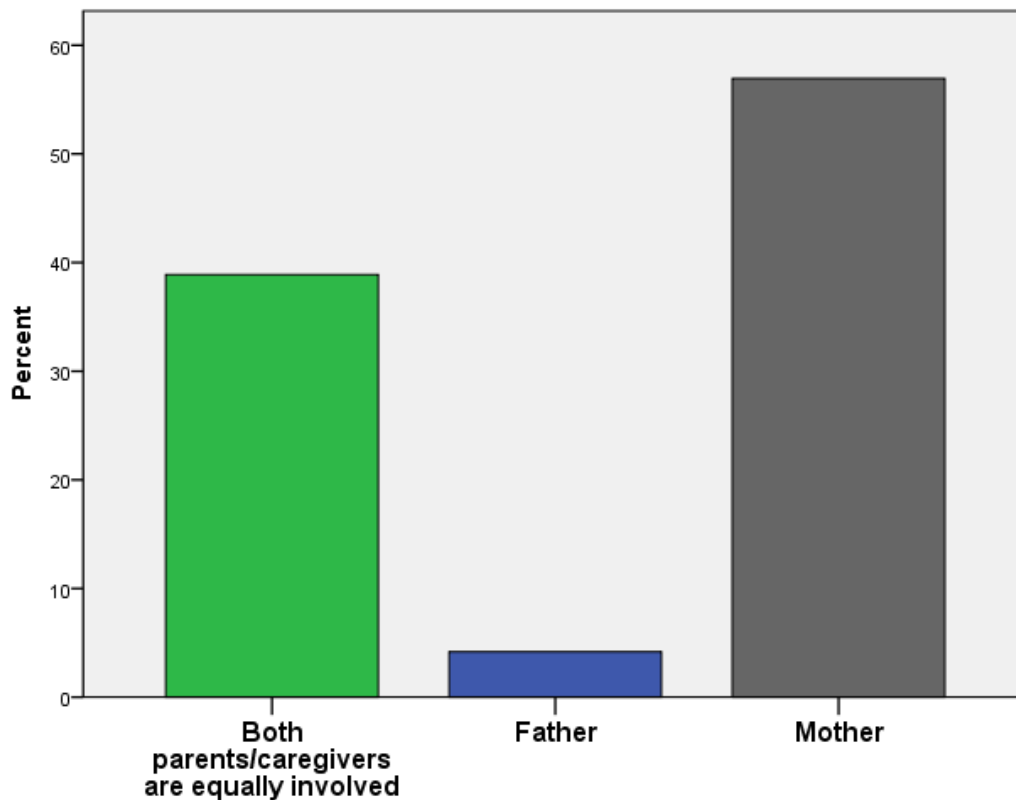
Figure 2: *Who is primarily responsible for school choice activities?*

The majority of families (74%) were spending 10 hours or more on their school-choice activities. This included tours, web research, and filling out paperwork and applications. This did not include time spent in conversation with friends and family about school choosing. The majority of individuals (56%) were talking about school choice 2–5 times a week. Another 23% were talking with others about school choice 6–10 times a week.

As with the interview respondents, the majority of respondents felt anxious about the activities and the process (51%). See Figure 3.
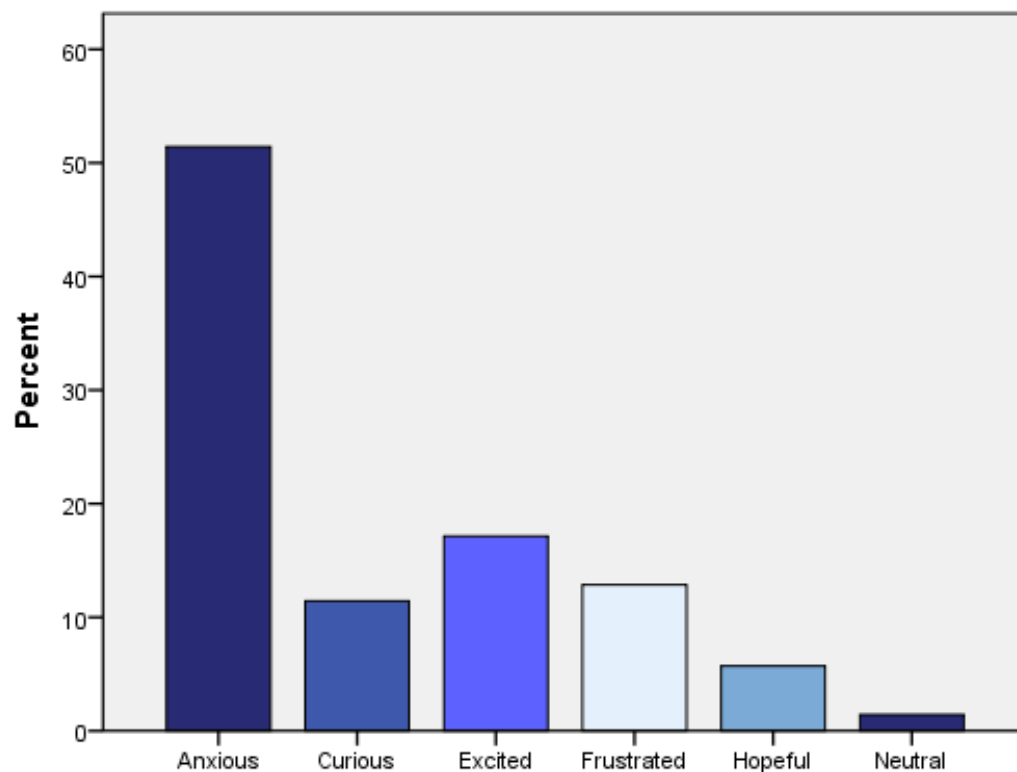
Figure 3: *How do you feeling about the school choosing process?*

  Analysis of school choice activities and other variables. I conducted a chi-square

analysis to determine whether there was a significant association between school-choice activity

variables and other variables. Most of these analyses did not yield valid results because the tests

violated the chi-square assumption of 20% or fewer of the cells having an expected count less

than 5. In other words, the combination of a small sample size and multiple variables produced

inadequate counts for analysis.

  In some cases, I was able to narrow this by combining response categories to see if I could

meet the expected count criteria and not violate the chi-square assumptions. For example, I recoded

"hours spent on choice activities" into *fewer than 10 hours* and *10 or more hours*. The expected

counts were adequate, so I ran a chi-square analysis to determine if there was a relationship between

the amount of time women spent on school-choice activities and their employment status. I expected

that women working full-time would spend less time on choice activities and women not working full-time would spend more. While the findings from the qualitative analysis suggested this was true, it was not statistically significant, ($p = .172$). However, when the men were included, employment status did impact who was responsible for school-choice activities. When the responding parent was not working full-time, he or she was more likely to be primarily responsible for school-choice activities alone. When the responding parent was working full-time, the family was more likely to share the school-choice activities equally.

Table 7.

Cross-Tabulation of Work Status and Who Was Responsible for School-Choice Activities

Work Status	Primarily responsible for choice activities		
	One parent	Both parents	χ2
Full Time Work	11	16	.016**
Other*	30	13	

*Note. *Other combines part-time work/household work, student, and household work*
*** = $p < .05$*

Another statistically significant relationship was between income and school-choice activities: families who made $100,000 or more were more likely to share the school-choice activities more equally than families who made less than $100,000, in which a single person (usually the mother) was more likely to be primarily responsible for school-choice activities.

Table 8.

Cross tabulation of income and who is primarily responsible for school choice activities

Income	Primarily responsible for choice activities		
	One parent	Both parents	χ2
$10,000–$99,000	21	6	.008**
More than $100,000	19	23	

*Note. ** = $p < .05$*

Preschool: Description & Analysis

In the interview findings, preschools were found to play a major role in providing families information about their children and elementary schools and serving as a network for the collection of information. Because of the importance of preschools for the interview families, I wanted to see what relationship preschool might have to other variables. All (100%) of the survey respondents sent their child to preschool for some portion of the work week. However, only 46% had their child in preschool for the majority of the work week.

Table 8.

Type of Care Child Receives for Majority of Work Week Hours

Type of Care	N	Percentage
Preschool	32	46%
Mother	21	30%
Family member/friend	4	6%
Home-based child care	3	4%
All others	10	13%

*Note: Total percentage does not equal 100 due to rounding.*

I combined these care categories into "majority of time preschool" and "majority of time non-preschool" to analyze the way in which preschool attendance interacted with other variables. The only significant finding was that families who had their child in preschool for the majority of the work week spent more time on school-choice-related activities than families who used other forms of child care for the majority of the work week.

Table 9.

Time Spent on School Choice Activities and Majority of Child Care/Week

Type of Care	Time Spent on School-Choice Activities		
	11 or more hours	10 hours or fewer	χ2
Non-preschool	22	16	.002**
Preschool	29	3	

*Note. **= p < .05*

School Characteristics

In the interviews, parents were ambivalent about the use of test scores, though they seemed to use test scores as a way to do an initial assessment of their neighborhood school. They were also somewhat unclear on the most important characteristic of an elementary school. The survey findings shed a little more light on what was most important to parents, suggesting that Seattle elementary school parents were interested in something different than "academic quality." Of the given options (see below), more parents chose a *focus on nurturing the whole child* (30%), and *a focus on fostering a love of learning* (20%) than chose *a strong academic program* (17%) as the most important school characteristic. See Figure 5 below.
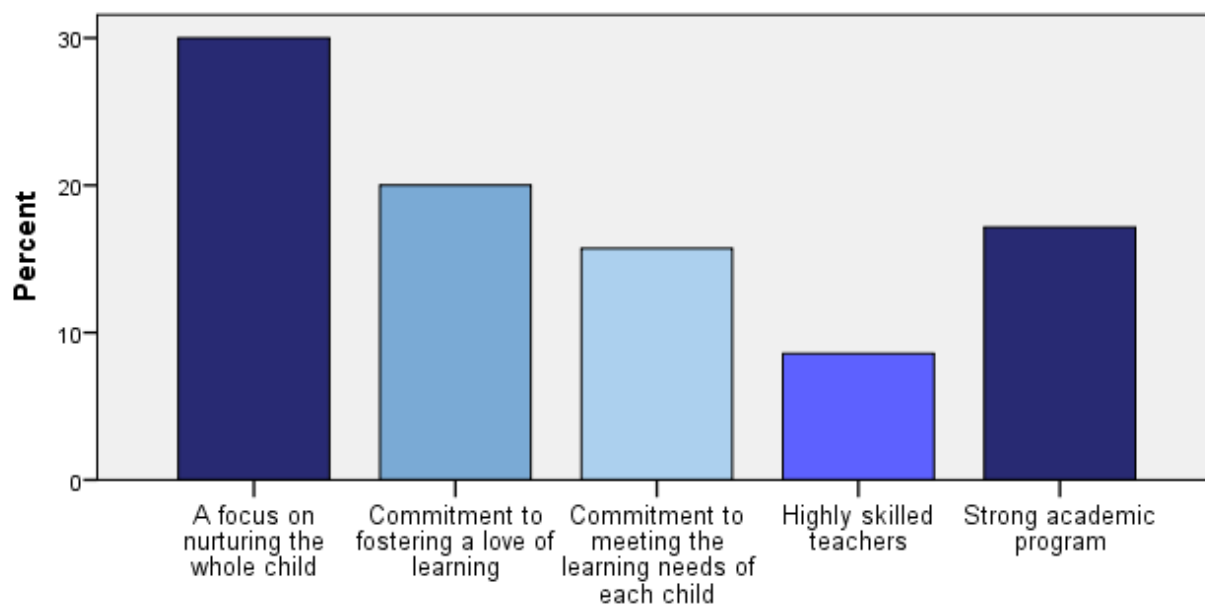
Figure 4: Which school characteristic is most important to you? A partial list of repsonses.

When the second most important characteristic was included in this analysis, there was an even greater gap between other items and academic program. *Fostering a love of learning* was the most often chosen characteristic of a school – chosen as a first or second priority 21% of the time, followed by *a focus on nurturing the whole child* (20%), *commitment to meeting the learning needs of each child* (15%), and *strong academic program* (12%).

Table 10.

Frequency of School Characteristics Cited as First and Second Priorities

	Frequency First Choice (N)	Frequency Second Choice	Percentage of Total Choices
Strong academic program	12	5	12%
Focus on whole child	21	8	21%
Foster love of learning	14	16	21%
Meet individual needs	11	11	16%
Highly skilled teachers	6	8	10%
Clear educational values	4	8	9%

While the limited survey responses made statistical analysis difficult, the survey did yield some statistically significant findings. The finding that families with their children in preschool for more of the week spent more time on school choice activities triangulates with the interview findings about the important role of preschool and preschool networks in the choice process. The finding that parents working full time are more likely to share the school choice activities also squares with findings about the relationship between domestic labor and the school choice process. The three interview participants who did not work (or go to school) full time reported that they bore more of the burden of school choice work because their husbands did not have the time due to their jobs. The survey finding that higher income couples are more likely to share the burden of school choice activities is likely a corollary to the finding that individuals working full time are more likely to share the activities. Families with two full time working parents are likely (in many cases) to have a higher income than families with one working parent.

Further, the demographic and descriptive information about who is choosing in Seattle is valuable. Many of the findings—including who is choosing (mostly white, educated, married women); the prevalence of anxiety during the process, and the most important school characteristics—do triangulate with interview findings and are discussed in detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 8

DISCUSSION

This chapter brings together the interview and survey findings in a discussion of their significance and makes suggestions for future research in three main areas. First, the findings add to evidence that parental preferences and choices are contextual and shaped by myriad factors. While academic quality was one of the factors with which parents were concerned, notions of academic quality were somewhat elusive to the parents and difficult to "see," given available information. Second, the study illuminates the notion of school choice as mother's work, adding to the limited empirical evidence in that area. Based on that finding, I explore two related areas with implications for policy makers and researchers: 1) mothers' role in the market place and the way the commodification of education intersects with notions of maternal identity construction, and 2) women's voices as a means to explore enduring tensions about the nature of choice and schooling. Lastly, I reflect on what the findings mean for Seattle choice policy specifically.

The Academic Enigma

Parental preferences are the very heart of school-choice reforms. Parents' desire for high-performing schools and their ability to find information about and choose those schools are essential for choice to improve school effectiveness and efficiency (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Levin, 1994, 2001; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000; Walberg, 2007). Researchers have also sought to understand, through the study of parents of different races and classes, the ways choosing may or may not exacerbate or assuage existing inequities in education. While many survey-based studies have shown that *all* parents express preferences for academic quality over other characteristics (Goldring & Rowley, 2006; Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Teske & Schneider, 2001; Weiher & Tedin, 2002), there is ample evidence that parents' behavior does not always

reflect those preferences (Elaqua, 2005; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000) and that race and class do make a difference in choosing behavior (Lee, Coninger, & Smith, 1994; Lubienski & Bell, 2005; Teske & Schneider, 2001; Weiher & Tedin, 2001).

Further studies have shown that preferences are shaped by more factors than past survey work suggests: factors considered exogenous to rational choice theory—the driving theoretical premise of school choice (Bell, 2005, 2007; David, West, & Ribbens; 1994; Wilson, 2010; Cooper, 2005;). Bell, for instance, has shown how parental preferences shifted throughout and in interaction with the choosing process (2008). Cooper (2007) identified the ways in which African-American mothers' choice behavior reflected their desires to fight against a system they viewed as historically oppressive. Taken together, the literature suggests families are weighing multiple factors in their decision making and that their choices are "complex, emotional, and culturally relevant" (Cooper, 2007, p. 508).

Because this study interviewed parents over the course of the choosing process, I had the chance to observe the evolution and interplay of the multiple factors. My findings support the perspective on parental preferences as complex, contextual, and evolving. Specifically, the findings suggest that parents are ambivalent, confused, and even conflicted about what academic quality means and how important academics are in elementary school. Their thinking about these issues was spurred by the school tours they went on and through conversations with partners and peers during the process. Further, even these active, mostly savvy parental consumers were not sure how to match their preferences with available information.

Eschewing test scores. Parents expressed ambivalence about the use of test scores and interest in more holistic notions of academic quality. While the interview parents used very low test scores to rule out their neighborhood school, they eschewed test scores to weigh the alternate

choices. As a source of information, test scores were not valuable to the parents, in part, because the scores did not have much meaning and, in part, because they did not generally support the testing paradigm. For instance, Sasha said, *"We looked at test information that's on the public school site…but all of that sort of feels. . . like not necessarily misinformation, but I'm not going to choose the school based on test scores necessarily…it's interesting or else it will be one piece of the puzzle but . . . it's not that important."* This reflects existing research that parents tend not to value formal sources of information (Teske, Schneider, &Marschall, 2000).

Broader notions of academic quality. The definition of the academic quality the interviews parent were looking for in a kindergarten was varied but, generally, it veered away from traditional notions of a strong academic program and towards more holistic notions of education. They used phrases like "integrated learning," interdisciplinary," "critical thinking," and "holistic." They also expressed interest in individualized learning or differentiated instruction: "teach kids where they are," "teach to different learning styles."

This matched the survey findings where 21% of survey respondents chose *fostering a love of learning* as either a first or second most important characteristic of a school. The next two most important characteristics were a *focus on nurturing the whole child* (20%) and *commitment to meeting the learning needs of each child* (15%). Strong academic program was next at 12%. These findings add to the conversation about how parents define academic quality in elementary school—an ill-defined survey construct thought to have a too broad range of meanings.

What is kindergarten for: academic versus social. Lastly, all of the interview parents wrestled to understand the basic nature of kindergarten was and, in some ways, of schooling was. This debate was generated in large part by what parents heard on tours. In response to hearing teachers say kindergarten was primarily for socialization, most parents spent time reflecting on

whether or not that was true and whether or not that was what they wanted. Susan, for instance, after being on a tour of a school that did not stress academics, described how it made her realize how important academics were to her. She said "*I know it's only elementary school and a lot of people say it doesn't matter, but I've got to believe that it does.*" Libby, on the other hand, went into her first tour mostly focused on test scores and academics and came out mulling a different perspective:

> *I mean, one of the things that the kindergarten teachers were saying is a lot of the ...first year is just social skills. Like, how do you slow your feet so you don't run away from people. Or how do you, you know, lessen your voice so you aren't yelling and how do you not stomp feet but use your words. And so I was like, OK, I mean, those are all just kind of a social skills, so it's all good.*

While thinking that socialization was "all good," Libby still worried that after three years of preschool, Jackson might not need such a focus on those skills. On the other hand, she did not want him to be somewhere that was so academic that it did not feel "safe and nurturing." This type of back and forth about the nature of schooling was typical of all of the parents.

Trying to see what you're looking for: gathering information. Even as parents grappled with defining what they were looking for, they were not sure how to "see" it, given the activities and information they had at their disposal. Many of the interview respondents wished for a more "rational" way to see their preferences in action. Harry, for example, said,

> *we would go to these open houses and you're trying to be rational and apply some like uniform standard across the thing, but at the end of the day, you're kind of like 'Well, that person seemed . . .' You know, I mean, it then feels very subjective. I would walk in and have a reaction to the principal or the . . . the way it felt. But, you know, I mean, how scientific is that?*

And Netu regularly, through the course of the interviews, said, *"I didn't see what I was looking for."* After one tour, in particular frustration, she said:

> *I was expecting more. I was expecting to see…I wanted to see really amazing teachers that were just . . . had the class spellbound [laughs] you know? That's what I wanted to see. I wanted to have like a really clear idea of what the curriculum was, what everyone should be learning, and maybe there is a curriculum. I mean, I think I did find it once on the website, But it wasn't . . . I don't know. It wasn't what I was looking for.*

I found no literature that examines tours and open houses as sources of information. The evidence from this study suggests that tours are separate from the categories of formal or informal information discussed in most of the literature. They are in a sense, formal, but the inferences drawn by parents and the proxies they use—school aesthetics, student art work, evidence of volunteerism—are more informal in nature. Parents used these types of proxies to match their preferences with the information that was available to them. For instance, Susan noted *"all the discipline notes on the wall that said 'keep your hands to yourself or 'No talking in the hall,'"* which made her concerned about a heavy focus on classroom management and behavior, whereas Libby noted the child-centered art work, which meant to her that the school appreciated children *"where they were."* Future research might examine tours and open houses as an information source and the use of proxies as an information-gathering strategy.

Are parents prepared to choose? Market-based theory depends on consumers having clear preferences for a high-quality product; the parents interviewed were unclear and wrestling with the very nature of the product itself, asking themselves, "What is school for?" throughout the process. This, combined with parents' confusion with how to match information with preferences, raises questions about how prepared parents are to be choosers if even the most

activist among them are not sure what they are looking for, how to see it, or what the nature of the product is. Lubienski (2008) observed that this notion is a missing component of the debate on school choice. He argued that parents act as "proxy consumers" for their children in many areas of life: purchasing clothes and food, religious choices, medical care, and others:

> However, in more specialized sectors, parents often defer to experts with arcane knowledge on technical issues such as medical care. The question, then, is whether education is best characterized as a market, politics, or science. But this is a question neglected in the discourse on parent choice, which advances largely from the assumption that education is akin to the inculcation of political or religious values, often played out in a market arena where parents can shop for the right education services for their children. While education does indeed embody these types of qualities, it is also the case that education requires some outside expertise…a consideration denied in the rhetoric about parental control. (pp. 103–104)

The findings revealed anxiety to be the primary feeling of both interview and survey respondents (51%) during the choice process. For the interview parents, this anxiety stemmed from both the logistical management of the choosing process as well as their desire to make the right choice. Along with Lubienski, others, like Reay and David, have noted how the schooling market changes the accountability dynamic for schooling: success or failure moves from the government to the parents (David, 1997; Reay, 1998), which would certainly be a cause for increased anxiety. Parents' anxiety along with their stated desires not to choose, *"It's a huge bummer. There's nothing fun about it."* suggests that even these activist parents felt out of their depth in choosing. Future research might examine the extent to which parents feel prepared to be

school choosers and investigate more deeply how their anxiety about school choice squares with other types of market based decisions. The prevalence of anxiety certainly fits with descriptions of maternal anxiety as the proxy decision-maker on behalf of her child. The next section looks more closely at women's roles in choosing.

Women as School Choice Policy Conduits

This study adds to the evidence from studies in the UK (David, et al., 1994; Reay, 1998; Ribbens, 1993) that school choosing is women's work. All of the women in the interview sample and 96% of the women in the survey were "primarily" involved in the school-choice activities. Either they shared the burden with their partner (two interview participants and 40% of survey respondents shared the work) or they alone were doing the bulk of the work (six interview participants and 57% of the survey respondents). This reflects current research that women continue to bear the burden of domestic labor (Fetterolf & Rudman, 2014) and that parent involvement in schools constitutes women's work (David et al., 1994; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Reay, 1998; Reay & Ball, 1998; Ribbens, 1993).

Only one other study set in the U.S. has specifically studied women's involvement in school choice (Cooper, 2005, 2007). Cooper's interview-based study of African-American mothers started from the assumption that women were doing the bulk of school-choosing work. The survey results here, therefore, are the first set in the United States to suggest that women manage school-choosing activities on behalf of their families. Further, the quantitative findings show a relationship between work status and responsibility for school choosing. When the survey respondent was not working full-time (either part-time or household work only), that parent was more likely to be responsible for the school-choice activities alone. In the survey sample, 33% of the women worked full-time and 58% fell into the part-time work and household work category.

The full-time working parents were more likely to share the burden of the school-choosing

activities.

Especially in elementary-school choice, as children transition from the more private

world of home and family to the more public world of K–12 education (Ribbens, 1993), women

are inevitably positioned to negotiate that transfer. Women bear the bulk of child care up to that

point (Reay, 1998; Ribbens, 1993) and construct notions of their own identity through that work

(Ribbens,1993). Given that and other research about women's roles in domestic labor, this

finding of women's role in choosing is not surprising. What's more surprising is that women's

role as a policy conduit of school choice has been largely ignored. As noted in Chapter 2,

women's role in infant care, child care, preschool, and work-life balance policies and issues is

seen as primary—understanding a mother's preference, role, and feelings guides policy makers.

This is not true in elementary school choice despite the fact that women's involvement in school

choice has a number of wide-ranging implications for school-choice policy-makers and

educators. In this section, I examine two of those implications: the importance of understanding

women's role in the market and the connection between ongoing work in schools with maternal

identity construction, and the value of listening to women's voices.

Women shape the market. In this study women's networks were the primary

information source about schools and school choice. Preschools, Moms' listservs, playgrounds,

and peers were the central dissemination point for everything from tour dates to test scores.

Notions of gender and family roles should play a greater role not just in research and policy on

school choice but in shaping the choice market with regard to what and how information is made

available. Corporate America has figured out that women are the primary purchasers of goods

and services: marketing and business articles and websites report that women account for 85%

of all consumer purchases and make 80% of healthcare decisions. Seventy five percent of women identified themselves as the primary shoppers for their households and "moms" had even greater purchasing power than women in general (Learned, 2003). By ignoring gender in research, policy, and implement of choice, schools of choice and choice-systems are failing to fully recognize the actual consumers.

By recognizing the ways women are consumers of education, researchers and policy makers might also be able to more fully understand the way the education market and the commodification of education in general reproduces class advantage. Reay (1998) has advocated for looking more closely at the relationship between mothers and the "marketplace of education" and argued that we need to begin to see the relationship between "mothering work" and social reproduction of class:

> Within a capitalist society in which market forces are ascendant (Jordan et al, 1994; Hutton, 1995; Wilkinson, 1995), 'acting in their child's best interest' inevitably means middle class mother are simultaneously acting against the interests of the children of other, less privileged mothers. This is not to blame middle-class mothers but, rather, to see all mothers as caught up in an educational market which operates on the (il)logic of 'to her who has yet more shall be given.' (Reay, 1998, p. 197)

In a more "commodified" version of childhood, of art classes and travel sports teams, intended to groom and shape, mothering takes on a different texture (Lareau, 2003; Reay, 1998; Reay and Ball, 1998; Stambach and David, 2005). In the competitive and individualized context of school choice, opportunities for concerted cultivation and shaping one's own identity by shaping a child flourish. As Stambach and David (2005) point out, there is some irony in the fact that a reform

intended to "alleviate urban poverty" actually reinforces and embeds middle class "interests and consumerist" (p. 1652) practices more deeply.

While not explicitly speaking of choice as an opportunity to advance their children and shape their own identities, the mothers in this study did speak of childhood as a time of concerted cultivation. Even as they spoke of the importance of elementary school as a place that fosters a love of learning and differentiated instruction, they also defined school as a space for a particular brand of advancement. They spoke passionately about the need for their kids to be challenged and their fears of their child's boredom. About her daughter, Anna said, "*I guess that's my deepest fear is that she's being squelched or being over looked or bored.*" This concern about boredom is one that Lareau (2003) identified in the lives of the middle- class parents and children she studied. Since one component of concerted cultivation is structured activities orchestrated by adults, down time or un-structured play is seen as "boring" (2003) by both children and adults.

Concerted cultivation, supplementing, and maternal identity construction. Further, notions of "supplementing" assuaged parental concerns about the possibility of a child being bored or not challenged. For instance, Trina, describing her approach to wherever her daughter ended up at school, said "*she'll be fine, so we can supplement. We can supplement. And she's the kind of kid that's going to excel wherever she goes. But I don't want her to be stagnant and I don't want her to be bored.*" Supplementing is another construct that aligns with concerted cultivation. All parents spoke about this need to "supplement"—to actively engage in designing out of school experiences or being involved in school activities—to ensure full engagement by their children. For instance, Libby described how she had already decided that if Jackson went to a public school "*we'll have to get involved with the school*" and "*make up the balance*" of

missing extra-curricular activities with "trips" or "*zoo memberships*." Netu talked about how she might have to do academic supplementing as well as supplementing for physical activity, "*swimming and yoga,*" if the school did not offer enough time for play. And Trina felt confident that she could provide supplemental academics for her child "*through fifth grade*."

This desire to keep advancing their children fits with Lareau's description of middle class parents being "increasingly determined to make sure that their children are not excluded from any opportunity that might eventually contribute to their advancement" (2003, p. 5). Ultimately regardless of their school choice, and despite their initial anxiety during the process, the mothers were reassured by their own ability to keep challenging their children and supporting their growth either outside of school or by committing resources to the school.

The concept of supplementing also fits with the possibility that school choice is related to the ways a mother shapes her own identity through school choice, including her ongoing role in her child's schooling and education. The interview findings pointed to women considering their own work schedules and career interests as they looked at schools. For Netu, for instance, more supplementing meant less opportunity to engage in her own work. For Reagan, a local school meant less driving and therefore more flexibility in her job choices after graduation. However, it was unclear to what extent the school choice itself might be a component of crafting an ongoing role throughout a child's academic career either as a) an intervention on behalf of a child or b) as a means of giving meaning to a particular maternal identity (Blair-Loy, 2003). Maternal identity construction through school choice and ongoing engagement in school activities is an area for future study. Recently, the main stream press has picked up on some of the ways affluent mothers, who have left the work force, make a career out of their "intensive mothering" and the way mommynomics—educated women providing their expertise to fund schools and charities—

fuels a culture of school auctions and high end bake sales (Martin, 2015). While not to this extreme, three women in this study did mention an ongoing role in a child's school as part of the school choice decision. This area of research is rich for an overlay of one of the many mothering typologies – such as Blair Loy's work devotion and family devotion schema (2003). Future research might look at how women with an orientation towards work or home thinks about her relationship to her child's schooling and how that interacts with the school choice process.

Women's dissonance and dilemmas. While the women were advocating for their own children, they were certainly not blind to the way their private choices interacted with the more public sphere of schooling. By truly listening to women's voices, policy makers, educators, and philosophers alike might learn more from their "dilemmas of choosing." Mothers' lived experiences with school choosing reflected some of the political and ideological debates about choice. Susan had to give "*hand signals*" at the playground to indicate to other mothers which side of the neighborhood school debate she was on. She was careful not to discuss her choice with those women who felt like her choice to not attend the neighborhood school was elitist or selfish. Reagan and Helene expressed sadness of something being "*lost*" by not attending their neighborhood school: the moms' networks and conversations were rich with the thinking and discussions with others about school choice and reflected the ways in which school choice is fraught political and ideological tensions.

This finding adds weight to Wilson's claim (2010) that school choice "compels parents to understand the moral, ethical, and political landscape of choosing" (Wilson, p. 225). While parents might not be savvy consumers of elementary education per se, they were attuned to the dilemmas of choosing enough to understand that their choice had meaning beyond themselves. They demonstrated an awareness that choosing what was best for their child was a privilege and

that exercising that individual right might mean the loss of something greater, some community cohesion or greater civic responsibility. In this way, the findings contradict those of Brantlinger (2003) and Blair-Loy (2003). These women did "think beyond their own children." While they sought to advantage their own children, they did not explicitly seek to disadvantage others. Some of them grappled whole-heartedly with understanding education as a private good versus a public good. They struggled with becoming complicit in the loss of something "communal." In contrast to what libertarian theorists might say about individual choices aggregating to a public good, these parents felt their "private" choice as a loss of something more communal and public.

Choice Policy in Seattle: Preschool, Kindergarten, and Options

For Seattle policy makers, this study raises some important questions about the role of choice in the district. Regarding the change from intra-district choice to option demand, the majority of parents expressed that it made little difference in the type of school their child would be likely to attend. Of the respondents, 90% (63) knew about the change. Of those 63, 44% said the new policy did not change whether they were likely to send their child to Seattle public schools (6% said they were more likely to attend and 20% said they were less likely). Of those who were "unchanged," they were evenly divided in the type of school they were most likely to choose: about 1/3 said option school, about 1/3 said private independent school, and the other 1/3 was divided between parochial and other. This would suggest that parents "on the market" in 2010 were going to be on the market regardless of Seattle's public school policy.

If the parents utilizing the remaining choice mechanisms in Seattle are predominantly white and educated, are those mechanisms serving their purpose? It's possible the option schools are intended to keep families who might otherwise attend private schools in the public system.

The option schools are generally whiter and more affluent than the schools' population in general. This pattern fits with other research about "option-demand" programs:

> Most studies have found that in such option-demand choice programs, parents of higher socioeconomic status (SES) – measured by education, income, or other factors – and white parents are more likely to exercise the option to choose. The values these parents hold may differ, as well: They seem more oriented to progressive-type school curricula, while lower SES, minority parents tend to prefer more traditional academic programs (Schneider et al., 2000). (Teske & Schneider, 2001, p. 613)

As the table below exhibits, this is true in Seattle. The schools listed are those options schools that existed at the time of the survey. Except for Jefferson K–8, they enroll greater percentages of white students than the district average. They all have a smaller percentage of special education students and all but three serve a lower proportion of students receiving free and reduced lunch.

Table 11.

Option School Demographics Compared to District Averages 2014–15

	% FRL*	% White	% African American	% Multi-racial	% Special Education
District Avg.	30%	44%	18%	6%	14%
Windward K–8	15%	69%	4%	10%	13%
Puget Sound K–8	16%	60%	14%	14%	8%
Williams K–8	30%	51%	13%	8%	9%
Upper Dale Elementary	8%	70%	3%	13%	7%
Jefferson K-8	57%	14%	37%	10%	7%
Ellington K-8	5%	78%	1%	11%	8%
Thompson	63%	44%	9%	21%	6%

Note: * Eligible for Free and Reduced-priced Lunch (FRL) – an indicator of poverty

As the option school families were "on the market" and visiting other neighborhood schools and private schools, this raised questions about the way their actions and choices interacted with non-choosers. In what way were those option-school choosers shaping schools and school programs through their demand for special types of services and philosophies? What about those families who were adhering to their assigned school without knowledge of options? Did the district have a mechanism for meeting their demands and needs as well?

Recently, the Seattle School Board decided that it would not become a charter school authorizer (Gross, 2015). However, one charter school, First Place Scholars, a school aimed at serving youth at risk for homelessness, has already opened in Seattle, and at least three charter schools are slated to open in Seattle in the next two years (Washington Charter Schools website). These new options will change the choice dynamic in Seattle considerably, bringing new

choosers to the market. An in-depth look at SPS policy on option schools is beyond the scope of

this paper; however, in a choice-based climate where at least 30% of the population is already

engaged in choosing activities and more families will join them in the next few years, an analysis

of current choice policies – as they relate to the overall option-demand structure and the district's

mission – might be beneficial.

One of the more surprising findings in the study was the impact of preschool on choosing

activities. The survey finding that parents who had their children in preschool for more of the

week spent more time on school-choice-related activities than families who used other forms of

child care for the majority of the work week matches the interview findings of preschools as

sources of information about and fuel for school choosing. This notion of preschool as

information source reflects research by Bell (2008) in her study of families looking at potential

middle schools and high schools. She found that children's current schools

> were repositories of resources for parents' decision making. Through their
>
> interaction with schools parents came into contact with resources that shaped
>
> which schools they were aware of and preferred. School interactions provided
>
> parents the opportunity to develop both human and social capital. Parents gained
>
> new knowledge about their children, choice policies, processes, strategies, and
>
> potential schools. Classmates' parents and school professionals shared advice and
>
> information. (p. 132)

My interview findings map onto Bell's findings quite specifically, in that mothers' conversations

with their preschool "parents and professionals" were one of the main sources for information

about everything Bell named: their children, choice policies, processes, strategies, and specific

schools. This finding makes intuitive sense: as consumers, we gather information about what we

want and need from being in or having been in similar situations. If we try one doctor but don't

like her bedside manner we might change doctors; or if we learn from that doctor that she cannot

treat our condition, we will seek out another who can. From a school choice perspective,

however, this raises a number of interesting questions for further study. For instance, does

choice beget choice? If a mother has gone through the learning process of choosing for one

preschool or school is she more likely to stay on the market throughout a child's school career?

Also, are certain school types likely to encourage or support choosing over others? As Seattle

takes up expanded preschool options, the city might be poised to better understand how

expanded early learning interacts with the market for elementary schools.

In a 2014 referendum, Seattle voted to increase taxes in order to pay for preschool for

low-income families. "The money will go to select, high-quality preschools to provide slots to

families based on income. It will ramp up over time, serving 280 children in 2015, and

subsidizing up to 2,000 by 2018. It will make preschool free for families earning up to 300

percent of the federal poverty level, or about $70,000 a year for a family of four" (Kaisman,

2014, para. 6–7). The expansion of preschools might impact parents' appetite for choice or

change parents' thinking about kindergarten. The interview findings hinted at a disconnect

between the public school teachers' expectations (or at least parental perception of teachers'

expectations) about the role of kindergarten – socialization – and parents' expectations for

kindergarten. It's possible that preschool parents, having had their children "socialized" by the

preschool experience, are looking at kindergarten differently than parents whose children have

not been in preschool. Again, this particular policy issue is beyond the scope of this study, but it

provides an avenue for future research about both parental preferences in elementary school as

they relate to preschool and the curricular links between preschool and elementary school, as early learning becomes an increasingly important focus in education reform.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include the sample construction for both the interviews and the survey and the survey question construction. The interview sample was small and purposive in nature. While focusing on an activist set of parents over the course of time allowed me to explore the issue of parental choosing in depth, it limited the generalizations that can be made from the study sample to the overall population. These parents were active, first-time choosers, which many choosers are not, and they were situated in a very particular context: an option-demand district, with some public choices, no vouchers or charters, and expansive private choice in the city of Seattle. For a city of its size, Seattle has a rather homogenous population, and it's possible that even in cities of the same size, but with different housing patterns and demographics, school choosing would play out very differently.

The survey sample had many limitations, all of which were discussed in the methods section in detail. It was difficult to conduct a survey of an unknown target population. Though the estimates at the population size seem reasonable, it's impossible to know for sure and there is a possibility of an under-coverage (Groves, et al., 004) error based on the unknown nature of the target and a possible mismatch with the construction of the sample frame.

The sample frame of parents attending tours introduced possibilities for sampling bias. If some parents were active choosers but did not attend tours, they would have been excluded from the sample. Further, because the recruitment did not play out according to plan, I had to make adjustments to the sample frame by including preschools in low-income areas, introducing the

possibility of adjustment error. Lastly, I was not able to manage the distribution of the survey as I had planned, creating issues of "noncontact" (Groves et al., 2004) with the sample population.

Another limitation with the survey was the construction of questions. Because I was trying to add new constructs to the school choice literature, I created new questions that were previously untested. In a number of cases I may have used too many response items because I did not have enough information to draw from regarding what factors were the most salient. This may have made it difficult for respondents "to distinguish reliably between adjacent categories" (Groves, et al., 2004, p. 223). For instance the following responses to the question, *Which school characteristic is most important to you?* might have overlapping components: *commitment to meeting the learning needs of each child* and *a focus on nurturing the whole child.* I think there are reasons to be confident about the construct validity in some cases because the survey response data can be triangulated with the interview findings. For example, anxiety was widespread in both the interviews and women's involvement in choosing was similar in both samples. Ideally, I might have used the interview findings to create a survey. Had I done that, I would have included questions about networks and other sources of information, more questions about preschool, and other questions driven by the interview data. Unfortunately, a multi-year study was not a feasible approach.

Ultimately the survey was a strategic non-representative sample. I used techniques to represent as broad a range of families across SES and geographical areas as possible and strategically adjusted recruitment techniques, including adding low SES preschools to the sample frame, to address some of the sampling problems. Still, based in my estimate of a population of 1950 families, 70 responses is low. The study did not have enough participants nor enough variability amongst participants, which created problems with some of the planned analysis.

However, I was able to generate descriptive data as well discover some statistically significant relationships between types of choosers and school choice activities. This survey is an important first step in understanding whom school choice makers are and their views of when it comes to choosing schools. These findings help triangulate the qualitative findings, provide insight into broader patterns of decision makers, and inform future research on this topic and the development of future survey instruments.

Lastly, I addressed my stance as a researcher in the methods section, but I think it bears noting that I myself am a white, middle-class, activist chooser. In some ways, my experiences as a mother and a chooser shaped my curiosity about the subject. Did it bias me in ways that limit the validity of the study? The confluence of the findings with existing literature as well as the triangulation between the interview and survey findings suggests that I uncovered the phenomenon as it exists and not just as I hoped it would be.

Conclusion

This study garnered findings from a wide range of topics related to parental school choosing, shining a bright light into the black box of parental preferences and behaviors. Findings within each of the main categories—the academic enigma, women as policy conduit, and Seattle policy implications—mapped on to previous work. And, hopefully, despite its limitations the study has taken a small step in extending the conversation in each one of those areas and leading others to further questions and areas of investigation. I would like to conclude with some final thoughts and lingering questions about each of those categories. With regard to academic quality and "seeing" preferences, I find myself wondering if parents are indeed prepared to choose. On the one hand, talking to parents over time allowed me to hear the constant negotiations they engaged in with themselves and their partners so it makes sense that I

would hear them vacillate between a preference for *challenge* and one for *safe and nurturing*. On the other hand, the constant questioning and some of the blatant contradictions in parents expressed preferences (yes, test scores; no, test scores) makes me question whether education should be a good on the market like toothpaste or even health care. Can we trust parents to make the right choices and even if they can, should they?

With regard to women as the policy conduit, I think the primary implication for researchers and policy makers is that women matter in school choosing, particularly elementary school choosing. Leaving them out – methodologically, conceptually, or practically – means that you do not have a full accounting of the phenomenon. When women have been recognized as drivers of so many markets and important to policy debates in so many arenas, I find myself wondering why education is so far behind. What will it take before it seems foolhardy to interview or survey a "parent" and not take specific note of whom that parent is and more fully understand his/her relationship to the child and to the choice? For how many other school and education policies might that be true? The overlap between gender, domestic labor and role in schooling bears more consideration particularly when this could be an important intersection where social reproduction of inequities might take place—through mothering in relationship to schooling.

Lastly, for Seattle Public Schools this is a good time to take stock of policies related to choice—with the coming of both charters and more preschools, the landscape of choosing is likely to change. While it seems the new assignment policy has served many families well, investigating the overall role of the options schools seems advisable given the nature of the families they serve and the coming change in the market.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to look inside the "black box" of parental school choosing and find out what processes and dynamics could better explain the phenomenon of choice. By recognizing choice as a process over time in which both gender and family dynamics have relevance, I was able to see the complexity of school choices and take some small steps to add to the conversation about "thickening" the ways we understand school choice and therefore how we might study it in the future and thereby construct relevant policy.

To conclude, I want to tell some of the stories that I did not get to tell about the project. One of those is about the "market" for schools in Seattle. While the policy context was mainly the Seattle school district's option demand policy, all of the interview families as well as at least 40% of the survey participants were considering independent private or parochial schools as part of their search (I say *at least* because I don't know how many were considering private schools, only how many reported private school as their most likely choice at that point in the search).

Only one study set in the United States has explicitly explored the interactions between what are typically seen as two different choice systems: public option demand and private (Goldring & Rowley, 2006). My findings suggest, as did Goldring and Rowley's, that the systems do not operate independently of one another; instead, there is a lot of interplay between the two. Interview participants spoke at length about the frustration of the two systems, public and private, having different timelines and expectations for families. One of the main issues for those applying to private school was that they would have to put down a deposit on a private school before finding out what public school they had gotten into through the lottery. Reagan expressed her frustration about this timeline this way:

What's so terrible about the whole school district [timeline] that I kind of hate? You

won't know if you got one of your first, second or third choices until after you have to tell

the private schools…and you have to pay money…I think that SPS should be…working

more in concert with the private schools because I think that it would be better for them. I

talked to them about it and they were like, we've got 44,000 students, and I'm like I know.

Even though Reagan and AJ received a substantial scholarship, the deposit they had to put down

represented a good portion of the amount they would have to pay overall. This meant they were

put in the position to make a choice between a specific private school and an unknown public

school.

Two of the eight interview families ultimately chose independent private schools.

Helene's daughter went to a very small, less expensive, neighborhood-oriented private school

and Reagan and AJ, the lowest-income family, ultimately chose the independent school after

receiving almost full financial aid. Reagan and AJ's case provides an interesting look into the

public-private market. As a non-traditional private school family, they had a fascinating ride

through the process, and their negotiations about the relative merits and disadvantages of the

privilege of private school would be rich for looking at the values tensions and "dilemmas of

choosing" as well as understanding how the markets interact. A study like that could provide

fodder for the exploration Wilson calls for into how "systems and policies might connect private

deliberations with opportunities for public conversation and decision-making" (2010, p. 240).

In looking at where the families did end up for kindergarten, I found myself wondering

what they would have to say, retrospectively, about their choice. Not all of them ended up at

their first choice, and some of them never found a first choice, per se. Susan was representative

of the majority of parents when she described having mixed emotions about their choice. She

said she "*got physically ill…literally threw up*" when she made the decision to not return to the

private preschool/elementary school where her daughter had been. On the one hand, she was

excited to send her daughter to a new *"dynamic place where teachers seem skilled and where*

there's a heavy emphasis played on the academics and there's this technology piece, which is an

added bonus." On the other hand, she was crafting a contingency plan: *"If it fails and she hates*

it and she's real unhappy, or I'm not happy with, you know, we'll go back to [the private

school]." Future research might follow up on how parents feel, retrospectively, about their

decisions and compare their impressions with those they had during the choice process. It would

be interesting to understand how retrospective explanations of choice, as most studies have used,

compare with those expressed during the process.

One other area of research I would like to pursue is how issues of race and class relate to

attending the neighborhood school. While the findings suggested that families were searching for

schools that would fit with their desire for concerted cultivation and advance their child, I didn't

have quite enough evidence to support some curiosities I had about the ways this also meant

having to keep their children from being educated with low-income, immigrant, or at-risk

children. Some parents hinted at concerns with behavior management or their own children

"being lost" in the neighborhood school, and they spoke of their concerns that this fear had

something to do with the race and class of the children in the school. In contrast, Brantlinger's

middle-class mothers (2003) issued explicit statements like "Children at that school are poor and

from multi-problem families. I don't want my children to go to school with children with too

many emotional problems because they draw attention away from ordinary kids" (p. 42). Some

of my interview subjects said similar things although they were more veiled. Libby, for example,

said, *"I don't know if I want Jackson to deal with so much diversity in a public school where he's*

going to get left out, trampled on, or any, like all the things that you never would want for your child to have to deal with." This type of comment fits with Brantlinger's finding (2003) that middle-class mothers found low income children "distracting and contaminating" to their own child's education (p. 50).

If I redid the interviews, I might push the participants harder on their concerns about having their child at the neighborhood school. While some of the language they used hinted at some racially and class-tinged discomfort, I didn't probe any deeper. To make her discoveries about middle-class women's feelings about other people's children, Brantlinger (2003) described how she pushed her participants hard, saying "the interview was hard for me," or "you put me on the spot" or "tough questions" (p. 56) as she asked them to elaborate or reflect on their negative impressions of low-income children. I did not engage in those kinds of discussions with my interview subjects. Further, I did not use discourse analysis or other types of critical stances or frameworks that might have positioned me to listen to the narratives in a different way.

Another interesting point for future research might be the ways Trina, who was in a domestic partnership with another woman, differed from the other women in the study. In many ways she was an outlier to the findings that related specifically to the women. I don't know enough to say whether that was because the division of labor with her partner put her in a gender-normed male role and her partner in a gender-normed female role, or whether it was because I spoke with her fewer times than most of the other participants, or something else. Talking to Trina's partner and exploring their family dynamic more closely might add to better understanding the relationship between school choice, domestic labor, and gendered family roles.

The same is true for the men I interviewed. In my one conversation with each of them, I was able to glean some similarities about their thinking around academic quality and with

challenge and boredom but I heard less about the "dilemmas of choosing" and nothing about conversations with networks or the interplay between their own work and school choice. That might be because I only spoke with them once or it might be because there were differences. Future work might structure interviews or redesign the survey sample and recruitment to do a comparison with men about school and school choice. It would be interesting to understand men's perspectives on the process and hear their thoughts on their own role.

      Ultimately this study did not capture the differences between men and women in school choosing or fully investigate the relationship between domestic labor, familial roles, and school choice. It did, however, capture the voices and experiences of women in a unique way that adds to the conversation about how families make school choices. The women's voices revealed the complexity and anxiety rolled up in school choice, the links between school choice and family and maternal priorities and values, and the thought-provoking way choice forced them to grapple with the normative dimensions of choosing. Though there is much more to be explored on each of those fronts, this study has taken some important first steps.

APPENDIX A: City of Seattle 2010 Census Tracts – Diversity Index
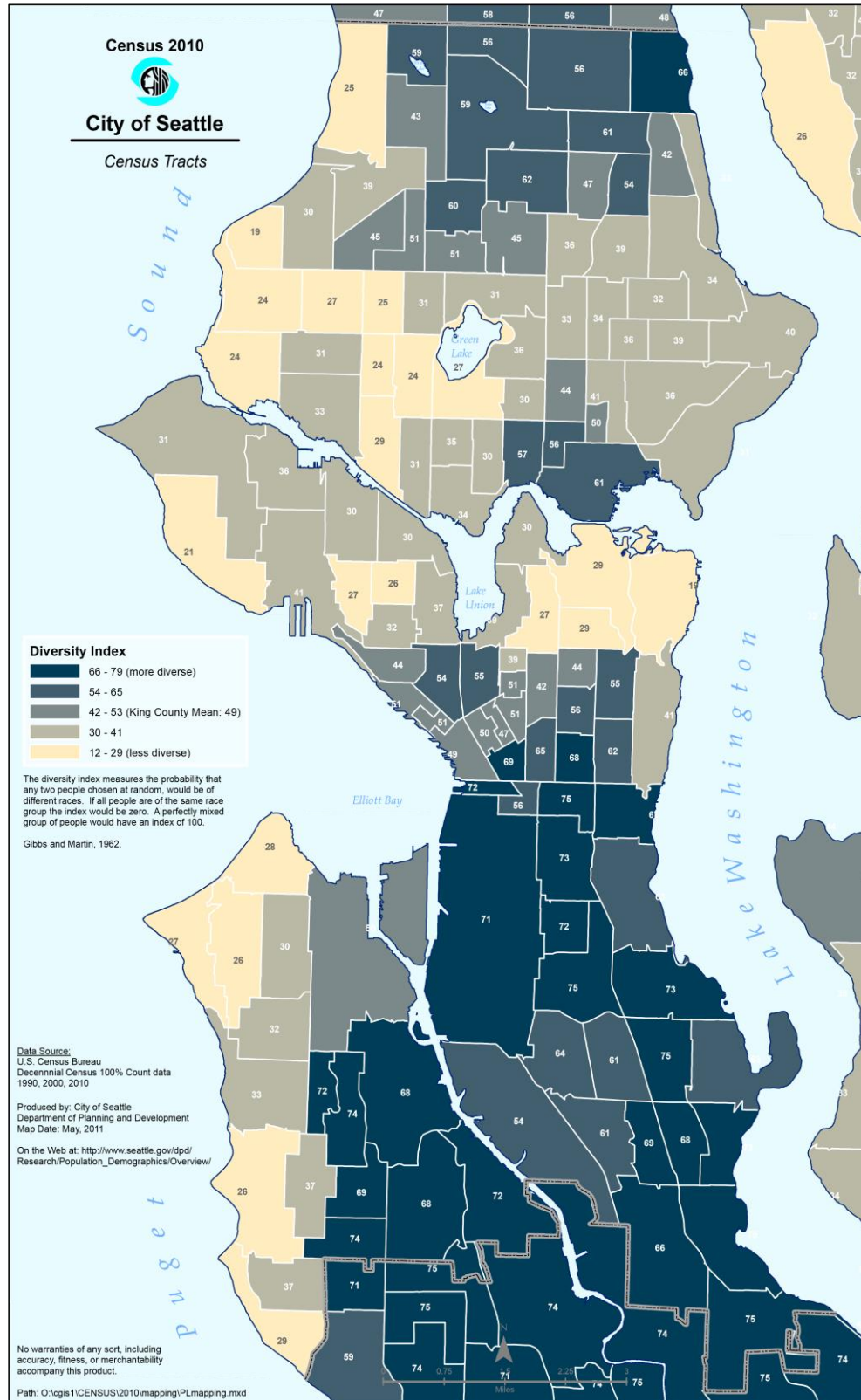
APPENDIX B

Interview Protocols for Parents

First Interview

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I'm hoping to start by learning a little bit more about you, your child, and his/her family.

1) Tell me a little bit about your son/daughter.

   o Name and age

   o Likes/dislikes

   o Pre-school/ day care/ time at home

2) Tell me a little bit about yourself

   o Work: inside/outside the house

   o Networks/affiliations: church, PEPS, extended family

3) Tell me a little bit about your family and (child's name) family.

   o Does (child's name) live with you?

   o Who else lives here?

   o Are there other family members or caregivers who will be involved in deciding where (child's name) goes to school?

I'm hoping to get a sense of your involvement in choosing where (child's name) will go to school.

Can you tell me about what you have done so far as you think about kindergarten?

- Tours
- Web research
- Conversations with family
- Conversations with friends

How have you been feeling about these activities and this process?

- Time commitment

I'm interested to know what you are looking for as you look at and think about schools. And in this set of questions, I am interested in your thoughts, specifically. I will ask about the rest of the family next.

I'm wondering if you are aware that the Seattle Public Schools has a new school assignment policy.

- Do you know what your neighborhood school is?

Has the change in policy made a difference in the way you are thinking about and choosing schools? How so?

When you think about what is most important to you about a school, what characteristics come to mind?

If you had to choose a school right now, do you know which one it would be?

- If not, do you know what type of school you are leaning towards
    - Neighborhood public
    - Option public
    - Parochial
    - Independent

I'm hoping to understand how you and your family are going to make this decision.

Who, in your family, has been involved in these activities and conversations?

Do you talk about what is important to each of you in choosing a school? On what do you agree? What do you disagree?

What do you feel like are the biggest challenges to choosing a school for (child's name)?

Follow-up Interviews

I'm going to start by asking you some of the same questions I asked last time. I will do this each time I visit.

Can you tell me about what you have done this month as you think about kindergarten?

- Tours

- Web research

- Conversations with family

- Conversations with friends

How have you been feeling about these activities and this process?

Have there been any changes in the ways you are thinking about schools or the school-choice process?

When you think about what is most important to you about a school, what characteristics come to mind?

If you had to choose a school right now, do you know which one it would be?

- If not, do you know what type of school you are leaning towards

  - Neighborhood public
  - Option public
  - Parochial
  - Independent

How have the conversations with other family members been going?

Do you talk about what is important to each of you in choosing a school? On what do you agree? What do you disagree?

What do you feel like are the biggest challenges to choosing a school for (child's name)?

APPENDIX C

Survey Measurement Matrix

Research Question Objective	Concept	Question	Source	Level of Measurement
Eligibility		This survey is for parents/caregivers with children who reside in Seattle. Do you live in Seattle?	Created	Binary
Eligibility		This survey is for parents and caregivers choosing a kindergarten for the first time. Is this your first time choosing a school for a child?	Created	Binary
1 Demographic	Respondent's gender	What is your gender?	Created	Nominal
1 Demographic	Child's gender	What is the gender of the child who will be entering kindergarten?	Created	Nominal
1 Demographic	Respondent race/ethnicity	Which of the following best describes your race or ethnicity?	Texas Charter School Parent Survey (Weiher)	Nominal
1 Demographic	Respondent household	With whom does the child entering kindergarten live?	Modified	Nominal
1 Demographic	Respondent income	Last year, in which category did your total family income fall?	Texas Charter School Parent Survey (Weiher)	Ordinal

1 Demographic	Respondent education	What is the highest grade or year of school you completed?	Texas Charter School Parent Survey	Nominal
1 Demographic	Respondent marital status	What is your marital status?	National Survey of Families and Households	Nominal
1 Demographic	Child disability status	Does your child require special care or assistance because of a disability or chronic illness?	National Survey of Families and Households	Binary
1 Demographic	Neighborhood	In what Seattle neighborhood do you live?	Created	Short Answer
2 Policy	Awareness	Are you aware that the Seattle Public Schools recently changed its school assignment policy?	Created	Binary
2 Policy	Impact	How has the change in policy impacted your choice of school for your child? More likely to go to Seattle Public Schools (SPS) Less likely to go SPS Unchanged Don't know	Created	Nominal
2 Policy	Awareness	Do you find the SPS assignment policy easy to understand?	Created	Binary
3 Preference	Academic quality	When you think about what makes a school good, what is the most important quality of the school you think about?	Stony Brook Survey (Schneider)	Nominal

3 Preference	Academic quality	When you think about what makes a school good, what is the second most important quality of the school you think about?	Stony Brook Survey (Schneider)	Nominal
3 Preference	School type	If you had to choose a type of school now, what type would you most like your child to attend? Public neighborhood school Public K–8 option school Religious school Other private school	Created	Nominal
3 Preference	Academic orientation	Does your child currently attend preschool?	Created	Nominal
4 Parental Behavior	Gender role	Who provides the majority of child care for the child entering kindergarten?	Modified childcare preferences survey	Nominal
4 Parental Behavior	Gender role	What work do you do currently?	Modified childcare preferences survey	Nominal
4 Parental Behavior	School choice activities/ gender role	Who is primarily responsible for the activities related to school choosing and enrollment (consider tours, applications, enrollment forms, web research)?	Created	Nominal

4 Parental behavior	School choice activities/ gender role	Who will be primarily responsible for making the final decision about where the child will go to school?	Created	Nominal
4 Parental behavior	School choice activities/ gender role	How many hours will the family spend on school choice-related activities?	Created	Ordinal
4 Parental behavior	School choice activities/ networks/ gender role	How many hours, per week, do you spend talking with family and friends about your school choices for this child?	Created	Ordinal
5 Parental attitude	Parental identity	How do you feel about the school-choice process?	Created	Nominal

APPENDIX D

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON INFORMATION FORM
School Choice Survey

RESEARCHER'S STATEMENT

We are asking you to be in a research study. The purpose of this form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. When you have read all the information, you can decide if you want to take the survey or not.

 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this survey is to collect information about parents' and caregivers' attitudes and behaviors related to selecting an elementary school in Seattle.

STUDY PROCEDURES

The study procedures include the completion of an online survey that should take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT

Some people feel that providing personal or sensitive information for research can feel like an invasion, or the research questions can generate painful memories or provoke a stressful response. You have the right to stop the survey at any time.

BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

The study will help better understand how parents and caregivers make school choices and could benefit local public and private schools, the Seattle School District, and the parent community.

OTHER INFORMATION

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Information about you is anonymous. The data will be used for the completion of my dissertation.
If you prefer to have the survey mailed to you, please contact Julie McCleery.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Julie McCleery.

Please print this form for your records.

If you agree to proceed, please click Next. Otherwise, you can close your browser to exit.

Thank you for taking this survey about school choice. Your responses will provide useful information about what is important to parents and caregivers when they are choosing schools and how they go about making their decisions.

 The first two questions will help determine if you are eligible for the study.

Question 1.

This survey is for parents/caregivers with children who reside in Seattle. Do you live in Seattle?

○Yes

○No

Question 2.

This survey is for parents and caregivers choosing a kindergarten for the FIRST time. Is this your first time choosing a school for a child?

Yes

No

Question 3.

What is your relationship to the child entering kindergarten?

○Mother

○Father

○Grandmother

○Grandfather

○Caretaker

✏ ◯Other:

Question 4.

What is your child's gender?

◯Female

◯Male

Question 5.

What will your child's age be on the first day of kindergarten?

◯4

◯5

◯6

◯7

The next two questions are about the characteristics of a school that are most important to you. Please think carefully about your educational priorities as you answer.

Question 6.

If you had to choose one item from the list below as the school characteristic that is most important to you, which one would it be?

◯Strong academic program

◯Very good standardized test scores

◯Diverse student population

◯Commitment to fostering a love of learning

◯Commitment to meeting the learning needs of each child

◯Good reputation for getting children into high-quality middle school or high school

○Small class size

○Highly skilled teachers

○Clear educational philosophy and values

○A focus on nurturing the whole child

○Faith-based education

○Proximity to our home

Question 7.

If you had to choose one item from the list below as the second most important school characteristic, which one would it be?

○Strong academic program

○Very good standardized test scores

○Diverse student population

○Commitment to fostering a love of learning

○Commitment to meeting the learning needs of each child

○Good reputation for getting children into high-quality middle school or high school

○Small class size

○Highly skilled teachers

○Clear educational philosophy and values

○A focus on nurturing the whole child

○Faith-based education

○Proximity to our home

The next set of questions is about your household.

Question 8.

What work do you do currently?

○Paid full-time work outside of the
home

○Household work

○Student

○Dual role: paid part-time work and ➡
household work

✏ ○Other:

Question 9.

Have you worked outside the home at any time in the past seven years?

○Yes

○No

Question 10.

Do you plan on returning to paid work after this child enters kindergarten?

○Yes

○No

Question 11.

Who provides the majority of weekday child care for the child entering kindergarten?

○I do

○A family member or close friend

○A paid baby sitter

○A home-based child care

○Day care or childcare center

○Preschool

✏ ○Other:

The next set of questions is about your school choice activities and opinions.

Question 12.

Who is primarily responsible for the school-choice activities for this child (consider tours, applications, enrollment forms, web research)?

○I am

○My spouse/partner

○Both parents/caregivers are equally involved

✏ ○Other:

Question 13.

How many hours will the family spend on school choice-related activities (consider tours, applications, enrollment forms, web research; do not include conversations with friends and family members about schools)?

○Less than 5 hours

○5–10 hours

○10–20 hours

○More than 20 hours

○Don't know

Question 14.

How many conversations do you have, per week, about your school search for this child?

○ Fewer than 2

○ 2–5

○ 6–10

○ More than 10

○ Don't know

Question 15.

If you had to describe how you feel about your school-choice activities and process, which of the following best describes your mood?

○ Excited

○ Frustrated

○ Anxious

○ Neutral

○ Curious

✎ ○ Other:

Question 16.

Who will be involved in making the decision about where your child will go to school (check all that apply)?

☐ Myself

☐ My spouse/partner

☐ Grandparents

☐ Other family members

☐Doctor or therapist

☐Friends

✏ ☐Other:

Question 17.

Do you and your spouse/partner have similar or different views about the right kind of school for your child?

○ We completely agree

○ We mostly agree

○ We both agree and disagree

○ We mostly disagree

○ We completely disagree

○ Not applicable

No response

Question 18.

What do you disagree about (check all that apply)?

☐Public versus private

☐What makes a good school

☐The importance of diversity

☐What our child's learning needs are

☐What we can afford

☐Educational philosophy

☐The importance of a values-based or religious education

☐The importance of going to a neighborhood school

✎ ☐Other:

Question 19.

Are you aware that the Seattle Public Schools recently changed its school assignment policy?

○Yes

○No

Question 20.

How has the change in policy impacted your choice of school for your child?

○More likely to attend a Seattle Public School

○Less likely to attend a Seattle Public School

○Unchanged

○Don't know

Question 21.

Do you find the Seattle Public School's enrollment system easy to understand?

○Yes

○No

Question 22.

If you had to choose a school now, what type of school would it be?

○Independent private school

○My neighborhood public school

○A public option/alternative school (school names were listed here as examples)

○Home school

○Parochial or religious school

○Don't know

✎ ○Other:

Question 23.

What can you see as the main obstacle that might prevent your child from going to the school of your choice?

○Getting accepted (private/parochial schools)

○Cost

○Transportation

○Getting in through public school lottery (option school)

✎ ○Other:

The next set of questions will help us learn a little bit more about you and your child.

Question 24.

What is your gender?

○Male

○Female

Question 25.

Does your child require special care or assistance because of a disability or chronic illness?

○Yes

○No

Question 26.

What is the highest grade or year of school you completed?

○8th grade or less

○Some high school

○GED

○High school

○Some college, no degree

○Two-year degree

○Four-year degree

○Graduate degree

Question 27.

In what Seattle neighborhood do you live?

Question 28.

Is your child currently in preschool?

○Yes

○No

Question 29.

With whom does the child entering kindergarten live?

○Both parents in the same household

○Both parents—joint custody

○Mother

○Father

○Relative

○Other:

Question 30.

What is your marital status?

○Married

○Single

○Divorced

○Separated

○Living with a partner

Question 31.

Last year, in which category did your total family income fall?

○Less than $10,000

○$10,000–$39,999

○$40,000–$69,999

○$70,000–$99,999

○$100,000–$149,999

○More than $150,000

Question 32.

Which of the following best describes your race or ethnicity?

○Black or African-American

○Hispanic or Mexican-American

○White or Anglo

○Asian or Asian-American

○Native American

○Bi- or multi-racial

Question 33.

If you would like to provide any further information about your school decision-making process, please feel free to make additional comments below.

Thank you very much for your time. This survey is part of a larger study about how families make decisions about schools. If you have questions about the survey or the study, please contact Julie McCleery.

APPENDIX E

Recruitment Flyers

University of Washington College of Education

Research Study

How are you choosing an elementary school?

Be a part of a research study investigating how parents/caretakers choose schools for their kindergarten-aged child.

- **Do you live in Seattle?**
- **Will your child be in Kindergarten next year (2011–12 school year)?**
- **Is this your first-time choosing an elementary school?**

If you answered yes to these questions, you're eligible to participate in a ten-minute online survey about school choice.

For more information or to participate please contact Julie McCleery (UW Doctoral Candidate) at 206-851-7923 or juliemccleery@yahoo.com.

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