"DISSATISFACTION": A CASE STUDY OF BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS PARENTS AND

PRIVATE PRESCHOOL CHOICE IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA

by

IAN D. PARKER

(Under the Direction of Sheneka Williams)

ABSTRACT

Enriching early education experiences have shown to have positive sustaining benefits including higher educational attainment, higher income levels, and upward social mobility (Barnett, 2008). Inequities in access to quality preschool can have long-term economic and social implications that stem from a lack of school readiness skills and can negatively contribute to the achievement gap. This is important because quality early education experiences are not accessible to all communities especially low-income Black communities in Georgia (Bassok & Galdo, 2016). Consequently, many children from both low- and middle-income families do not get to experience preschool and middle income families who can afford to, resort to enrollment in private settings. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to explore the reasons why Black middle class mothers choose to enroll their children in private preschool settings and to understand their perceptions around preschool quality and school readiness.

This qualitative case study touched on the role that household income plays in preschool choice among 12 middle class Black parents who enrolled their children in private preschool settings in metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia. The research questions were as follows: 1) How do Black middle-class mothers of children enrolled in private preschool settings navigate the preschool education market in Georgia? and 2) How do Black middle-class mothers of children

enrolled in private preschool settings perceive preschool quality and school readiness during their preschool search? To explore these research questions and to analyze the data a constructivist grounded theory data analysis method was employed.

The findings of the study do not reflect the perceptions of all parents but rather the specific sample of parents included in the study. The findings reflect the dissatisfaction of inequities found in the US system of education and a dissatisfaction for the inferior quality of preschool education found prevalent in Black communities in Georgia compared to settings in White communities. Data was collected using semi-structured interview, a stimulus activity, and the analysis of documents that illustrate the private preschools curriculum, history, admissions, and recruiting. The data from their responses were coded, categorized, thematized, and then triangulated to verify the study results' credibility.

INDEX WORDS: Early childhood education, private preschool, pre-kindergarten, Black, middle class, school choice, race, class, capital, habitus, school readiness quality, desegregation.

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by

IAN D. PARKER
B.A., Morehouse College, 2004
M.A.T., Mercer University, 2010

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IAN D. PARKER

Major Professor:	Sheneka Williams
Committee:	Jori N. Hall
	Kyunghwa Lee

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Interim Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2020

DEDICATION

       This dissertation is dedicated to my mother and first teacher, Dorothy Parker. Thank you for courageously and confidently leaving Fredrick Douglass High school to integrate Fredrick Sasser High School in Upper Marlboro, Maryland. Thank you for making the sacrifices to enroll Ansel and me in private preschool and then in the Assumption School of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This dissertation is also dedicated to my smart and funny niece, Zoe Grace, who absolutely loves her private pre-kindergarten class and has brought me so much joy and laughter during my time in my program. Lastly, this dissertation is dedicated to anyone who has ever felt discouraged.

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There are a bounty of people who are not named outright who have supported me because there simply too many to name, but they know who they are. You have checked on me,

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

"So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own. Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live." – Exodus 1:20-22 (NIV)

It was not until I started graduate school in Georgia that my mother, a retired educator, told me she enrolled me (and my twin brother) in a private preschool, Suburban Hills School, while growing up in New Jersey. She said she did it because she was dissatisfied with the preschools that were available. Now an educator with an advanced degree, she integrated her high school, attended a local HBCU (historically Black college or university), and later married. She would simply say she wanted us in the best preschool she and, to a lesser extent, my father could find. Nevertheless, the research is clear that exposure to early childhood education (ECE) can improve school readiness skills, help close the achievement gap, and contribute to producing widely acknowledged short and long term, health, civic, cognitive, behavioral, and socioeconomic benefits to both the student and to society (Belfield, Nores, Barnett, & Schweinhart, 2006; Fuller, Pai, & Bridges, 2007; Nores & Barnett, 2014; Weiland, Ulvesta, Sachs, & Yoshikawa, 2013). The problem addressed in this study, however, is the lack of access to quality, publicly funded early childhood education for Black families in Georgia (Bassok & Galdo, 2016; Nores & Barnett, 2014).

As it relates to access at the time, New Jersey in the early 1980's had seen glaring differences in education funding between wealthy school districts and low-income school districts, and it resulted in stark differences in education resources, quality, and outcomes. As a result of the 1985 New Jersey Supreme Court school-funding case decision, *Abbott vs. Burke*,

poor communities or "Abbott Districts" would see a significant increase in education funding while the public provision of preschool would be called the Abbott Preschool program. Abbott Preschool was inadequate for my mother's then three-year old Black boys. Therefore, she chose to drive (out of her way), "upstream" from Morris Township about twelve miles east to Chester to drop us off at the private preschool center and then drive about thirty miles west where she taught high school in Hillside - a neighborhood adjacent to Newark which had historically seen race riots and an increase in crime and violence over the years. With her own salary as a teacher contributing to a dual income household, my mother made this sacrifice because she had the means to do so and she felt that private preschool was a better option. Otherwise, she and many other parents would have to be relegated to the closest preschool options, which may not always be the best available. Having experienced racism inside and outside of the classroom growing up in the 1960's and by now disinterested in Abbott Preschool, my mother considered her options and enrolled us in the best preschool she and my father, a corporate executive at the time, could afford. As a Black mother with her master's degree who insisted that only American Standard English was spoken at home, her decision to choose private preschool over state-funded preschool reflected her distinctive preference among available schooling environments for her children. This trend followed my brother and me, as he and his wife enrolled their daughter in private preschool in Georgia, and I am writing a dissertation about private preschool in that same state.

To improve access for Black children and for children from low-income backgrounds, researchers and policymakers have made longstanding calls for increased expansion and funding for state pre-kindergarten programs (Barnett, 2013; Barnett, Carolan, & David Johns, 2013; Bassok & Galdo, 2016; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007; Magnuson & Shager, 2010;

Schweinhart, 2013). To this study, Schulman and Barnett (2005) have encouraged states to increase their funding to expand publicly funded preschool programs, further emphasizing the need for increasing early education access to more children from middle-income households. When preschool slots are inadequate with quality and availability, parents who can afford it turn to private alternatives. Therefore, taking into account both race and class, the focus of this study addresses the factors that contribute to the reasons why middle-class Black mothers choose to enroll their child in private preschool settings, regardless of whether or not publicly-funded preschool is a viable option. I am focusing on mothers specifically because mothers are consistently identified as key decision-makers for their children's education (Radey & Brewster, 2007; Tang, Coley, & Votruba-Drzal, 2012).

Historically, the story of school choice for Black families in the U.S. contextually embedded in systemic racism and its impact on both socioeconomic and residential status (Boger & Orfield, 2005; Kluger, 2004; Rothstein, 2017). Residential segregation in the United States has played a detrimental role in the Black community's pursuit of equal educational opportunities since Reconstruction. Since Reconstruction, laws condoning segregation shaped from Supreme Court decisions have catalyzed those policies with longstanding implications. Segregation did not only affect the social and residential aspects of living, but it also has sustained long-term and generational economic implications against the Black community, further widening the racial wealth gap (Baradaran, 2017). In schools, segregation also sustained unequal educational facilities and inadequate resources for Black children compared to schools attended by White children (Bernstein 1962; Boger & Orfield, 2005; Kluger, 2004; Patterson, 2002). Certainly, descriptors for an adequate education would have indeed fallen far short for Blacks in comparison to the ample resources, materials, well-trained teachers, and sound school

building facilities enjoyed by Whites. The essence of these laws and others have impacted present-day access to childcare options for both low- and middle-income Black families. With recent increased public investments to early childhood education over the years, there is evidence of a spectrum of quality in early childhood education settings experienced by children of different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds (Bassok, Finch, Lee, Reardon, & Waldfogel, 2016). Furthermore, Fram and Kim (2012) found that today's children are still "segregated from the start" in that Black children in the US experience childcare social environments that may diminish the potential for developmental gains through de facto racial-ethnic segregation.

A higher socioeconomic status, however, would warrant access to better quality schools, but to be both Black and middle class still comes with its own nuances of marginalization (Lacy, 2007; Pattillo; 2013). Murnane and Reardon (2018) found that parents from the highest income levels enroll their children in private schools at much higher rates that low-income families, regardless of race. For Black families however, higher socioeconomic status does not eliminate the effects of race on (pre)school choice (Davis & Welcher, 2013). For example, Davis and Welcher (2013) found that after accounting for class, race remained an integral factor to access to school quality, favoring predominantly White schools due to class and residential implications. From 1968 to 2013, Black families regardless of income, have increasingly enrolled their children in private schools, but White families have enrolled their children at slightly higher rates even as private school enrollment rates decreased across races since 2000 (Murnane & Reardon, 2018). Furthermore, families across all income levels have overall decreased their private school enrollment in urban settings and suburban settings over the past few decades, but middle-income families in urban areas regardless of race have seen the sharpest decline in private school enrollment (Murnane & Reardon, 2018; Murnane, Reardon, Mbekeani,

& Lamb, 2018). As it relates to the current study, Davis and Welcher (2013) found that there is a

significantly higher probability for Blacks with higher socioeconomic status (SES) to attend

private schools compared to Blacks with lower SES when faced with negative neighborhood

school conditions due to residential segregation (Davis & Welcher, 2013). Pattillo (2015) asserts

that "uniformly high-quality neighborhood schools are the reality that many better-off Whites

and (to a much lesser extent) Black parents experience" (p. 63).

   As a result, the Black middle-class parents searching for schools may use their resources

and social capital to circumvent the educational disadvantages reflective of schools that face

challenges to academic achievement. These challenges include fewer financial resources,

structural issues with physical facilities, lower levels of academic achievement in students, and

higher rates of teacher turnover that may come with the narrow level of choice reflected in

residential segregation (Davis & Welcher, 2013).

   Meanwhile, market-based school choice reform has often presented challenges for low-

income households. Due to the lack of resources to consider all early schooling options for their

children, many poor families only have the illusion of choice but not actual choice when

compared to parents with higher incomes. For example, Bell (2009) found that parents choose

schools from choice sets comprised of schools that are available based on SES. Poor and

working-class parents had chosen among schools that had lower teaching quality and

increasingly impoverished curriculum options while middle class parents used their social capital

in their professional networks to access more selective schools touting higher academic

performance assessments (Bell, 2009). Yoon and Lubienksi (2017), however, found low-income

parents valued schools for many of the same reasons as middle-income parents but still chose to

enroll their children in schools that were close to home for comfort and convenience, resulting in

schools with higher concentrations of students of the same race and SES. While there is little to no existing literature on Black middle-class mothers' private preschool decision-making, there is a significant number of studies involving Black households and (pre)school choice and involvement in general (Allen & White-Smith, 2017; Davis & Welcher, 2013; Fram & Kim, 2008; Schlay, 2010; Stulberg, 2014; Weinraub, Shlay, Harmon, & Tran, 2005; Williams, Banerjee, Lozada-Smith, Lambouths, & Rowley, 2017).

As stated above, mothers were chosen for this study because of their consistent role in childcare decision-making. Black mothers and maternal guardians were specifically chosen for this study because of their subjective experiences of racialized marginalization from schools and their historical fight to access the best school environment for their children (Cooper, 2005; Wilson, 2014). Black mothers have been the object of deficit-driven views historically held by many educators and policy makers that assume Black American culture is a hindrance to Black children's educational development (Cooper; 2005; Cooper, 2007; Wilson, 2014). Furthermore, Black mothers are often stigmatized as incompetent in selecting quality schools for their children because they are perceived to lack the initiative, knowledge, and priorities to make sound educational choices (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Wilson, 2014). Therefore, Black mothers' identity of being both woman and Black contribute to school choice, but this study will only focus on race and class. As it relates to race and class in education for example, Suizzo, Robinson, and Pahlke (2008) found that middle-class Black mothers actively engage in racial and educational socialization practices with their children so they can develop positive self-identity. Also, Cooper's (2007) study of Black mothers shows how school choice-making can be an important form of "motherwork" as a way to improve Black children's lives. In all, this

current study extends the Black school choice literature to highlight private preschool choice for Black mothers' preschool-aged children and their perceptions of quality and school readiness.

Including Georgia, access to public preschool programs is a widespread national concern (Dept. of Education, 2015; NIEER, 2019). For example, Georgia ranks 27th nationwide among state spending per child enrolled in preschool at $4,411 but also ranks 8th in the nation for access to preschool for four-year olds (NIEER, 2019). Most states and the District of Columbia have now caught up to states like New Jersey and Georgia and offer some form of publicly-funded pre-kindergarten program for its four-year olds, but some states do not yet offer state preschool (NIEER, 2019). This regional implication, coupled with residential segregation as mentioned above, has contributed to the inequities in access to early childhood education in the United States (Barnett, 2008; Iruka & Morgan, 2014; Weiland, Ulvesta, Sachs, & Yoshikawa, 2013; Valentino, 2018; Wright, 2011).

And among states who do offer public preschool programs, there are still widely varying rates of available enrollment including limited accessibility by region and to special education preschools (US Department of Education, 2015). For example, rural children, whose parents tend to opt for in-home or relative care, are less likely to be enrolled in formal early learning settings compared to urban children (Temple, 2009 as cited in Wright, 2011). Nationally, White children are more likely than Black children to be enrolled in a preschool while White children are also more likely to access what is considered to be a higher quality preschool than Black children, including Georgia (Bassok & Galdo, 2016; Nores & Barnett, 2014). Lastly, children from more affluent households are more likely to be enrolled in preschool centers (as opposed to in-home family childcare settings) compared to children from low-income backgrounds (Nores & Barnett, 2014; Wright, 2011).

My mother's experiences and decision-making within her racial and class identities reflected what many mothers both then and now dutifully balance while navigating the vast and disparate early childhood education market. And as the ECE marketplace supports a variety of models for curriculum, some policy makers and stakeholders hold different outlooks that counter or supplement what quality early education represents (Dahlberg, Moss, & Allen, 1999; Paanenen, Kumpulainen, & Lipponen, 2015; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). The divergent conceptualizations of pre-k curriculum have certainly caused quite the "debate" where policy-makers advocate for either the cognitive/academic skills emphasis vs. the whole child approach of developing young children (Bishop-Josef & Zigler, 2011). Regardless, middle class parents follow the "rules of the game" and use their social capital to navigate the school choice marketplace in urban settings. But what kind of environments private preschools offering that speak to the values of Black middle-class mothers' perceptions of appropriate child development? What child development models do private preschools foster that align with Black mothers' perceptions of school readiness and preschool quality that may not be fostered in public preschools? In light of these questions, this study further addresses the underlying race- and class-based distinctions that underpin enrollment into the private provision of child care.

This study is also particularly relevant to preschool choice literature because, as mentioned above, Georgia has a free, universal pre-kindergarten program that has become nationally recognized. Universal access means a family has the right to register their child for a pre-k slot regardless of income. Though access to a universal pre-k slot may be challenging for Black middle-class mothers due to an overall lack of available pre-k enrollment slots, some of these mothers may not choose universal pre-k even if the chances to secure a slot were much greater. In Georgia, even as market demand for pre-k slots exceeds supply, Black communities

are more likely to have Georgia Pre-K classrooms with lower quality compared to classrooms in White communities (Bassok & Galdo, 2016). Therefore, as a residual focus, this study will also unearth the perceptions of Georgia's universal pre-k program and how, if at all, those perceptions affect these mothers' decisions to choose private pre-k settings.

To reap the full long-term benefits of exposure to quality ECE, programs must get children ready for learning for kindergarten and beyond. School readiness is linked to the achievement gap and is very critical to educational attainment for children later in life. When Black children do not have access to quality preschool programs, they are more likely to struggle academically when they begin kindergarten – struggles that may continue through adolescence. Nevertheless, school readiness research gleans mixed results with curriculum models. Fuller, Bein, Bridges, Kim, and Rabe-Hesketh (2017) found Black children benefited from academic-focused preschools and their gains persisted through kindergarten. Children exposed to a whole-child curriculum, on the other hand, were no better ready for kindergarten than locally-based achievement-focused preschools (Jenkins, Duncan, Auger, Bitler, Domina, & Burchinal, 2018). Lastly, aspects of school readiness can also vary by program and may not include the social and cultural needs of individual children and their families (Brown, 2013), further adding to school readiness' salience and complexity in the school choice marketplace. This study hopes to understand Black parents' views on school readiness, particularly in an urban setting like Atlanta, Georgia.

Atlanta, Georgia

The city of Atlanta, Georgia is a large metropolis in the Piedmont region of Georgia. It is also a major education, cultural, economic, and social hub for Blacks in the Southeast. Atlanta has a significantly large population of Blacks and the largest consortium of HBCUs (historically

Black colleges and universities). Those schools include Morris Brown College, Clark Atlanta University, Spelman College, the Interdenominational Theological Center, and Morehouse College. Other local universities include Georgia Tech and Emory University. The Atlanta metro area is home to two of the state's largest school districts, Dekalb County Schools and Gwinnett County Schools.

The Atlanta area is also home to many private pre-kindergarten settings with a variety of curriculums. Regardless, in 2018 for Georgia the average cost families spent on a four-year old in a child care center was $6,851 while in New York it was the highest at $11,700, while Mississippi families paid the least in the US at $4,439 (Child Care Aware of America, 2019). The section below gives more detail about the Georgia Pre-K program.

Georgia Pre-Kindergarten Program

Georgia Pre-K's program is a state funded pre-kindergarten universal program for 4-year old children, regardless of family income. The program, which now serves over 80,000 children statewide, operates on a school year schedule of 180 days/year with 6.5 hours/day and class sizes restricted to one pre-k teacher and one assistant teacher for up to 22 students in each classroom, a 1:11 teacher-student ratio (NIEER, 2019). Lead teachers must have at least a bachelor's degree and assistant teachers must have at least a CDA (Child Development Associate) credential. Curriculum must provide educational experiences in language and literacy, math, science, social studies, creative arts (music, art, drama), social and emotional, and health and physical development and must align with the Georgia Early Learning Development Standards (GELDS) in teachers' written lesson plans (Peisner-Feinberg, Mokrova, & Anderson, 2017). Below is a brief history of the Georgia Pre-K Program.

In the early 1990's, the late Governor Zell Miller recognized that Georgia was

consistently ranked towards the bottom nationwide in graduation rates, SAT scores, and per pupil expenditure (Raden, 1999). He wanted to implement the best possible plan that reflected an investment in all of the citizens of Georgia through an early childhood education initiative. Out of what started as a targeted program for low-income families, Georgia Pre-K has become universally voluntary where any citizen has the ability to enroll their four-year-old child, regardless of income. Aware of the research and positioned to take on political pushback in the early 1990's, Governor Zell Miller successfully proposed and implemented an early education program to be funded from state lottery revenue. Because of the dismal academic status of the state compared to other states, Miller's goal was to position Georgia to become more competitive in the classroom (Raden, 1999).

The initiative to start a free state-funded pre-kindergarten program exclusively for low-income families first started with issues regarding a source for funding. However, in recognizing the needs of the poor and their lack of access to quality education, Georgia Pre-K was designed to reach families in low socio-economic communities who were not being serviced by the existing Head Start program. Georgia Pre-K Programs are based on the guidelines set by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The intention was to use the Early Childhood Division of the Georgia Department of Education and the Pre-K Advisory Committee in partnership with a host of family and child services that included the Department of Family and Children Services, the health department, and education leaders to provide quality education and health services to low-income four-year-olds using developmentally appropriate curriculum for school readiness in the K-12 system (Raden, 1999).

During the pilot years of 1992-1995, low-income families who enroll their four-year-old child can expect to receive any of a portfolio of services that are recommended as needed, by a

Family Service Coordinator. Once enrolled, the classroom must contain a certified teacher and/or paraprofessional. Services for parents provided by partnering agencies, included but were not limited to mental health, job training/placement, drug treatment/intervention, and parenting resources (Raden, 1999). A free pre-k program for low-income families was not attractive to private childcare proprieties who wanted to be included in this initiative but did not want to operate in low-income communities. In response to the exclusivity of solely poor families benefiting from state lottery funds, Georgia later scaled up the pilot program and expanded its lottery-funded program to be open, or universal, for all four-year-olds in 1996. Allowing for-profit proprieties to operate early education centers meant there would be more facilities to reach more families. But given the biased preferences to socioeconomic demographics, for-profit centers have been and still are reluctant to operate centers in low-income communities – communities who need high quality early education services the most (Raden, 1999).

Today, Georgia still maintains its Georgia Pre-K and has received national recognition. In February 2013, then President Barack Obama visited the College Heights Early Childhood Learning Center located in metro Atlanta (Decatur) and lauded the state on the national stage. State-lottery funding for universal Georgia Pre-K undergirded the President's exemplification of Georgia's efforts as an exemplar of exposing children to high-quality early childhood care and education to the rest of United States. While most states struggle with scaling up both access and quality, Georgia sustains its widely-cited, high quality Georgia Pre-Kindergarten program yet still struggles to improve access so even more children in both rural and urban areas can attend pre-kindergarten, as universal access does not mean universal availability (Henry, Henderson, Ponder, Gordon, Mashburn, & Rickman, 2003; Peisner-Feinberg, Schaff, & LaForett, 2013). In order to improve access for more children, policy makers have called for states to expand

publicly funded preschool (Broekhuizen et al., 2016; Fitzpatrick, 2008; Woodson, 2017). This will provide students from low-income and Black households with a better chance at exposure to early childhood education (Bassok & Galdo, 2016).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to understand how race and class influence preschool choice and perceptions of preschool quality and school readiness among Black mothers. These influences and perceptions may speak to the reasons for them to enroll their children in private preschool settings in metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia. The study centered around investigating the implications around parents' choosing specific preschool centers that house pre-kindergarten classrooms and require tuition payments for enrollment. The pre-kindergarten level was chosen for this study because pre-kindergarten is widely regarded as a catalyst for school readiness for K-12 settings (Barnett et al., 2018; Hatfield, Burchinal, Pianta, & Sideris, 2016; Winterbottom & Piasta, 2015; Williford, Maier, Downer, Pianta, & Howes, 2013). Georgia offers free, universal pre-k for four-year old children in the state through its Georgia Pre-K Program which is funded by the state lottery. The lack of access for middle-income families to this publicly funded pre-k, however, may contribute to private preschool enrollment within the childcare market in Metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia.

The goal of the study was to add to the current literature the strategies that Black middle-income families employ to navigate and find adequate and accessible early childhood education for their children when decision-making factors, like cost for example, are not as much of a factor. Furthermore, this study addressed specific perceptions related to the factors and influences of those Black parents who choose to enroll their children in private, tuition-based pre-k over Georgia Pre-K. Moreover, I want to understand the values that these parents assign to

quality and school readiness in early childhood education and the long- and short-term benefits

and implications of pre-kindergarten in a private tuition-based schooling context.

Research Questions

1. How do Black middle-class mothers of children enrolled in private preschool settings navigate the preschool education market in Georgia?

2. How do Black middle-class mothers of children enrolled in private preschool settings perceive preschool quality and school readiness during their preschool search?

Significance of the Study

The Biblical quote at the beginning of the introduction sheds light on the current

phenomenon under study. With King Ramses' recent proclamation that all male Hebrew

newborn babies were to be put to death, Moses' mother Jochebed, a Hebrew slave, not only

wanted her newborn son to survive but to also live a thriving life, free from slavery and

oppression. The parents in this study are in a similar situation with childcare but of course they

are not avoiding the fate of physical death for their children, like Moses' mother in ancient

Egypt. Instead, this study is significant because the parents in this study may be securing

privileged early education settings as an attempt to prevent their children from living a life of

social death. According to Pierce (2017), W.E.B. Du Bois consistently emphasized how schools

in the US, founded under racist capitalism, have been critical tools in preparing Black children

for a life of social inferiority and stunted upward economic mobility due to a racialized caste

system of education. Love (2016) refers to this practice as spirit murdering, where Black children

are denied inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance. Therefore, this study is

significant because it sheds light on the strategies Black parents use to navigate the inequitable

environment of the early childhood education marketplace and how their perceptions of quality

and school readiness may speak toward their enrollment decision-making.

In addition, parents in this study placed heavy consideration for faith-based private school settings for their children. The story of Moses' infancy and development are also applicable because the circumstances under which he was born reflect conditions that echo many Black parents' experiences today – navigating a caste system for survival. Therefore, the quote above applies to this study in that some Black parents chose to enroll their child in school settings typically reserved for the affluent, in an attempt to access better educational resources and future upward social mobility for their children. Black parents, as a historically oppressed group in the United States, have utilized private and charter school options as alternatives to public school settings for their child. This study highlights how Black parents' educational aspirations for their children form well before their child's K-12 enrollment and the ways that may relate to their decision not to enroll their child in public pre-k in Georgia. Lastly, this study highlights how Black parents begin early in exposing their children to childcare settings that they perceive to give their children an educational advantage not otherwise available. Therefore, this study adds to the current literature the voices of oft-overlooked Black parents in the field of private school choice in early childhood education.

Dominant discourses in early childhood education research are heavily saturated with studies of academic and social remedies to low-income Black children and children of color through calls for expansion of publicly funded preschool (Barnett, Carolan, & David Johns, 2013; Henry, Henderson, Ponder, Gordon, Mashburn, & Rickman, 2003; Peisner-Feinberg, Schaff, & LaForett, 2013; Valentino, 2017). The target demographic of most preschool choice studies tends to overwhelmingly include samples of low-income Black parents/guardians and often disregards the experiences of Black families with higher household incomes (Forry, Shimkin, Wheeler, & Bock, 2013; Radey & Brewster, 2007; Schlay, 2010; Tang, Coley, &

Votruba-Drzal, 2012; Weinraub, Shlay, Harmon, & Tran, 2005). This study therefore

contributes to the literature the preschool perceptions of middle-class Black parents who have the

resources to secure the private provision of preschool for their child.

      In considering the intra-racial school choice implications, this study therefore, adds to the

literature the voices of those middle-income Black parents who also navigate the early childhood

education market in Georgia, in light of Georgia's state-funded, universal pre-k program. The

inclusion of middle-class parents' perceptions regarding access and quality in the preschool

context adds to the school choice literature with particular attention to access, choice, and school

readiness implications among early childhood education settings and more specifically, the

resources and the capital used for enrollment. Policy recommendations for states to increase

funding for broader access to preschool settings inherently reflect calls for broader access across

socioeconomic status, especially for states supporting universal pre-k programs like Georgia. In

light of that, this study will also contribute additional policy insights to the scope and depth of

the perception of public vs. private preschool enrollment in the context of the targeted vs.

universal preschool debate, considering the infancy of the Georgia Pre-K program, along with

the urgency to increase public funding for scaling up preschool access and quality.

Definition of Terms

      The terms below are used frequently throughout the study while these same terms may

have variations in their meanings when used in other studies. For the current study, however, the

terms below apply:

      Black & African American: members of the African Diaspora living in the United States.

There is a difference between Black and African American whereas Blacks are members

of the Diaspora who may identify as African American, African, Caribbean, and/or

represent areas of Latin America. Blacks in the United States who are descendants of slaves represent African Americans. For this study, I will be using Black mothers as participants.

Middle-income & middle class: The national median income is $59,039 and the household median income range is $35,885 to $107,120 with a median income in Georgia of $53,559 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). For this study of middle-class Black mothers, the desired family income is $50,000 (Lacy, 2007, p.3). Both middle-income and middle-class will be used interchangeably.

Preschool: Preschool is a broad term usually referring to a classroom-based early childhood education experience for children, generally ages birth through four. Speaking as a former preschool and pre-kindergarten teacher in Georgia, preschool can also be the grade level for three-year olds immediately prior to pre-kindergarten. The pre-kindergarten or pre-k grade level is the classroom-based early education setting for children immediately prior to kindergarten. In Georgia, public pre-k is operated through its universal Georgia Pre-K program, which is the state lottery-funded setting offered for four-year olds regardless of household income. "Child care is typically used to refer to an arrangement with a center, family home, relative, or some other provider to care for a child while a parent works. However, it is important to note that these terms often overlap" (Schulman & Barnett, 2005, p.2). In this study, preschool and child care will be used interchangeably, unless otherwise noted. Private preschool is a center-based setting serving children ages birth through four-years old where parents pay tuition for their child to attend. It is worth noting that many private preschools serve children up to age five or six and may be a part of a private school that serves children through twelfth

grade. Private pre-kindergarten is a center-based classroom setting typically for children ages four- or sometimes five-years old during the school year immediately prior to kindergarten where parents pay tuition for their child to attend.

School readiness: School readiness has been relatively defined as encompassing five dimensions including physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and knowledge (Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995). Generally, school readiness consists of broad characteristics from socioemotional domains and language and knowledge domains (Barbarin et al., 2008).

Quality: Quality in this study of early childhood education includes structural and process quality indicators. Structural quality involves staff-student ratios, teacher qualifications, director qualifications, and licensing requirements (Bassok & Galdo, 2016). Process quality is inclusive of the experiences the child has in a classroom, the teacher-child interactions and instructional practices (Bassok & Galdo, 2016).

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter One describes the problem, purpose, research questions, and the significance of the study. Chapter Two illustrates a review of the literature surrounding race and racism, school readiness, Black parent preschool choice, private education, class status, and details of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Chapter Three describes the research design and rationale. Also covered in Chapter Three will be the data collection and analysis procedures and a detailed description of the study's strategies for reliability and validity. Chapter Four will discuss the results of the data analysis and Chapter five will cover the implications of the findings.

CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

"And she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile." – Exodus 2:2-3 (NIV)

This dissertation study garners its influence from a collection of previous literature involving the Black community and early childhood education as well as literature around quality and school readiness in early childhood education. The review of the literature below also includes studies of preschool choice, preschool curriculum models, and their race and class-based implications. Though there is no research on private preschool school readiness data, literature on Georgia Pre-K and school readiness is included for context. This chapter will cover the historical and social characteristics of the phenomenon understudy as well as the lens or framework that will be used to examine preschool choice decision-making.

Black Middle Class and Education

Lofton and Davis (2013) assert that the Black habitus includes the historical and current experiences that explain systematic inequalities that have produced racial disparities in their homes, schools, and communities. In a study of African Americans parents and students who attend a predominantly White middle school, Lofton and Davis (2013) illuminated what it means to navigate the Black embodiment while navigating schooling decisions through themes of neighborhood inequalities, intergenerational tracking, and agency within the Black community. Here, the Black habitus represents the ways that the African American students and parents react to the world's treatment of them based on their perceived place in the world – and how to

combat, disrupt, and resolve to resist the social inequities that race controls around access to education.

One way that middle class Blacks have exuded their Black habitus is by opting out of public school choice assignments in favor of using school choice options like charter and magnet schools to escape schools they perceive as lower quality (Davis & Welcher, 2013). Pattillo (2015) calls these and other decisions a part of the everyday school choice politics in the Black community. Included in the Black habitus is Pattillo's (2015) assertion that empowerment, control, and agency are popular elements of Black school choice discourse. For example, a Diamond and Gomez (2004) study of both middle (n=8) and working class (n=10) African Americans parents of elementary school children in Chicago show differences in access based on income. Black parents from varying income statuses experiences school choice in disparate ways. Black middle class parents' habitus, and therefore choice behaviors demonstrated that they place significant value on the geographic location of quality schools and school choice, they possess substantial resources with which they choose, and they engage in elaborate school choice processes that emphasize schools compatibility with their children's needs, known as customization (Diamond & Gomez, 2004).

US Private School Enrollment, Higher Socioeconomic Status & Education

Overall, the percentage of US students enrolled in a private elementary school decreased from 10% in 1948 to 9% in 2015 (Murnane & Reardon, 2018). The rate at which Black students from middle and high-income backgrounds has fluctuated as well. Black students from middle-income backgrounds only attend private school at a 6% rate compared to the 5% rate in 1968 while Black students from higher-income backgrounds rose from 11% in 1968 to 16% in the mid-1990's, only to level of and decrease to 14% in 2013 (Murnane & Reardon,

2018). They also found that in the South private elementary school enrollment rate of children from high-income families increased from 14% to 19% from 1968 to 2014, noting a 14-percentage point gap in 2013 between the private school enrollment rates of children from high- and middle-income families in the South (Murnane & Reardon, 2018). This study considers the allure of private school enrollment based on socioeconomic status.

In the history of private school choice, early advocates advanced choice from the position of freedom - religious freedom or the freedom of parents to guide their child's education all while economic advocates preach the level playing from competition that comes from an education marketplace (Carpenter & Kafer, 2012). Still, Black parents favor the option to choose what is best for their child, even when considering the school assignment and social challenges that they face in the US. Blacks and political liberals in the 1960's, for example, formed "freedom schools" for Black students suffering from substandard schools in the deep South and "free schools" as a reaction against the bureaucratic educational establishment (Carpenter & Kafer, 2012; Forman, 2005). Black parents are not opposed to using private school options when they are dissatisfied with what is available.

As mentioned above, in a private school choice study based out of Nashville, Goldring and Phillips (2008) found that in the absence of vouchers for parents to use towards private school education, there is a direct positive correlation between increased household income and the likelihood a parent would enroll their child in a private school setting. They also found that the more parents have access to social capital, the more likely parents are to consider private school for their children. Goldring and Phillips (2008) also assert that due to the perception of private schools fostering more parent involvement compared to public schools, parents are not "pushed" away from public schools based on their dissatisfaction with the school but instead felt

a "pull" towards enrolling their child in private school because they feel private schools facilitate and value parent communication and parent involvement in comparison.

However, to understand the tastes that Black middle-class parents have towards schools, we first must understand what school represents to them and how that correlates their children. Bourdieu's conceptualization of class status inherently assumes that the identity in the affluent class also assumes a family's ability to remain a member of that affluent class. This is done through the transmission of social capital, social reproduction. Using their habitus and capital, social groups are understood to possess bundles of real and symbolic resources and to pursue active strategies to facilitate the intergenerational transmission of physical and symbolic property (Nash, 1990). And since schools favor the capital of the dominant White middle class (Byrne, 2009), schools serve as locations of agency for the reproduction of almost all social class, privileging the affluent (Nash, 1990). Therefore, social reproduction is also the medium to perpetuate social inequality through subsequent generations.

Social inequality is certainly found in the process of school choice options and decisions among the affluent parents in the US and across schooling levels. The underlying class struggle that is embedded in the field of early childhood education, the focal point of the current study, is manifest in the struggle for access and advantages. For example, in a preschool choice study of White middle class college professors in Vermont who had preschool-aged children (3-5 years old), Nelson and Kofman (2008) found that parents favor center-based programs where they emphasized play and intellectual development for K-12 school readiness and placed a premium on sending their children to programs with similar values like creativity and also similar parents to them. Avoiding preschool centers with parents of children from disadvantaged backgrounds also represents a veiled desire to segregate affluent children from children with deficiencies in

their home setting (Nelson & Kofman, 2008). The parents in this study support private preschool for themselves and universal preschool for disadvantaged backgrounds but support private preschool enrollment on the basis of quality and choice. In terms of capital, the findings suggest that parents secure private preschool as an attempt to secure a relative advantage by creating worlds that rely on the kind of social capital that values parent involvement, monitoring local education options, and preserving their privilege by accessing school choice information based on the social networks that are unavailable to poor parents (Nelson & Kofman, 2008).

In a charter school choice study of predominantly White affluent suburban parents (n=553) in the metropolitan Denver, Colorado area, findings show how affluent parents rely on their own personal research about available schools as well as their social networks of a family, friends, and coworkers about the school choice landscape (Altenhofen, Berends, & White, 2016). Similar to Goldring and Phillips' (2008) findings, there was a pull towards privately-operated school settings, however dissimilar is the presence of the push away from public schools because of perceptions that their child will be better challenged academically compared to public schools. Good teachers, the school's reputation for academic quality, the type of curriculum, and small class sizes round out the top reasons for choosing the charter school while factors considered not to be as important included whether the charter school had an after-school program, a full-day kindergarten, or required students to wear uniforms (Altenhofen et al., 2016). Another part of this study that applies to the current study is the practice of parents not only using their social networks for school choice, but how they also use information in a variety of forms. Altenhofen et al. (2016) found that about 93% of the affluent White parents also considered performance data from the schools' website and almost 72% of the parents used other education websites as useful information they used when they considered charter schooling. This speaks to the

document analysis portion of the data collection in the current study. Altenhofen, Berends, and White's (2016) study shows that upper-income families use various forms of information, including written and electronic, to make school choice decisions.

Two gentrified areas of Atlanta (Kirkwood and Grant Park) were the site locations of a school choice study of predominantly White middle class mothers (n=30) of children who are under the age of five (Roberts & Lakes, 2016). Results were broad yet still consistent with school choice patterns among highly educated mothers from higher income backgrounds: Parents desiring public schools opposed a direct instruction-style curriculum and showed concerns for teacher quality and the school's reputation; Parents who favored private schools were not satisfied with the attendance zone of their public school system and the restrictive admissions process of charter schools (Roberts & Lakes, 2016). The study's findings are consistent with the influence of social capital as "the pressure to manage the school-selection process is widespread because gentrifying parents attempt to reproduce social class privilege" (Roberts & Lakes, 2016, p. 209). What is consistent is the pursuit of maintaining privilege while the broad findings are classified by the authors' typology of parent-gentrifiers who have varying levels of (self-explanatory) school choice navigation strategies: the loner, the follower, the searcher, and the collaborator (Roberts & Lakes, 2016). All these types of parents activate social reproduction through their children through school choice, further perpetuating social inequities in education. "The building blocks of social existence for gentrifiers are children, a common ground for friendships because their offspring are longitudinal investments" (Roberts & Lakes, 2016, p. 216).

Race and Desegregation

The story of school choice in the United States is contextual, based on a family's resources and place of residence. For African American communities, the story of school choice cannot be told without mention of the social construction of race, legislation affirming segregation and later desegregation, and how that impacts school choice education policy since the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954.

The social construction of race in the US is based on domination and power in how a racial identity is interpreted followed by what that race's perceived function has/will be in a white society, with whites as the dominating racial group. Race as a social construction is rooted in the values and judgments placed on that dominated race by a dominating race (Leonardo, 2004). Conceptually, whiteness as a social construction can also be viewed as an orientation that embody access and inherited opportunities (Ahmed, 2007). Access to opportunities, based on racial orientation, varies widely and historically favors those who are white and affluent. Whiteness' distinction of race therefore revolves around what whiteness is, who is a member of whiteness, what whiteness wants at the expense of other races, and how whiteness should be positively represented in its navigation of and interactions with the perceived subordinate races in society. "…Whiteness is an orientation that puts certain things within reach…Race becomes, in this model, a question of what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do 'things' with" (Ahmed, 2007, p.154). In the context of race, this study revolves around how middle-class Black mothers perceive the early education market in Georgia and how they do the "things" of a racialized decision-making process in the context preschool choice.

Harris (1993) emphasized the process of assigning value to racial identities to reflect what the dominating race wanted from of them. For over two hundred years in the United States

West African men and women were forced to become slaves and were therefore perceived as a racial caste, objectified as property in that the determinacy of worth for dark-skinned people with African ancestry equated solely to labor as a possession of whiteness. Slaves outnumbered the colonizers and plantation owners in the South and soon the Black skin color was racialized for dehumanizing labor and servitude for Whites. Referring to Black slaves as "beastly", "uncivilized" creatures during the colonial era served as social justifications to whiteness's self-perceived untarnished persona and newly self-established reputation of civility and structure that they brought to the "discovered" America. The constructed value of whiteness is defined by the extent to which those perceived subordinate races serve the goals and objectives of those who own the rights to whiteness as an identity (McCoy & Rodricks, 2002). Here we see how the thought process of socially constructing a fabricated and equally pejorative value to a racial identity intended to serve the purpose of benefiting the supremacy of Whiteness in early American society. This is the beginning of the domination process that would later grow to socially divide US society along racial and socioeconomic characteristics, along with other social identities (Leonardo, 2004) for hundreds of years to come.

Therefore, race was used to interpret individual and collective worth in the socio-cultural foundation of the U.S according to the judgements of those who embodied Whiteness. Notwithstanding, there are criteria and objectives to the social construction of what it means to be White. Ahmed (2007) illustrates Whiteness based on what Whiteness has secured in the past, what its members can reach or obtain because of Whiteness' resemblance, and how the orientation of Whiteness is cultivated and reproduced. Only those who identify as White based on their resemblance and inheritance of Whiteness can glean the rewards and benefits that come from the maintenance and preservation of the state of being White, i.e. White privilege

(McIntosh, 1988). The opportunities afforded for Whites are exclusive and undergird the permanence of racial inequities in the current US education environment (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2006) – including access to quality early education settings.

      Roberts v. City of Boston **and** ***Plessy v. Ferguson***. Historically, early childhood education in the US is no stranger to the effects of the racial inequities in access to resources and capital between Whites and Blacks. The North's predecessor to *Plessy v. Ferguson* comes in the form of *Sarah C. Roberts v. City of Boston* (1849), a court case that incubated racialized Jim Crow policies well before the Civil War. Boston, Massachusetts was also known for establishing the first school for Black children in 1798 (Levy & Philips, 1951). This was a way for free Black children to receive an education in the form of separate, or segregated schools. Established to circumvent the harsh prejudices and its dangers towards the Black children of the Boston area who attempted to attend White schools, the school would eventually be known as the Smith Grammar School. Years after becoming a part of the Boston Public School System, however, and in spite of the "Negro schools" operating peacefully from the White schools in Boston, Blacks and abolitionists becoming increasingly enlightened of the effects of Jim Crow in Boston, protested against the existence of the Negro schools because of its evident neglect and desperate need for repairs and supplies (Boston, 1846). Benjamin Roberts, a Black leader in the Boston anti-segregation movement, and his lawyer Charles Sumner, filed a lawsuit against the City of Boston on behalf of Roberts' five-year-old daughter, Sarah. Roberts attempted to enroll his daughter in the several White primary schools (i.e. early childhood education) in Roberts' district that they would pass on her way to the all-Black Smith Grammar School. All the White schools' committees openly denied her admittance to the public schools solely on the grounds of her race,

enforcing segregation in a city that already by this time had various public schools exclusively

for Blacks (Levy & Philips, 1951).

Sumner's arguments were presented on the grounds of unconstitutionality, inequality of

protection of rights, the Fourteenth Amendment, the Massachusetts constitution, racial caste, and

discrimination. With separate schools and the implication of Black's inferiority, schools for

Blacks did not justify the White and Black schools being equal because of the stigma of Blacks

being inferior and thus their schools following suit - proving the existence of an unconstitutional

caste system within the public school system in the City of Boston. In fact, Sumner's entire

argument in the case was so poignant that it "deserves to be included in a volume of great

documents of American democracy, for its nobility of sentiment, literary excellence, and grasp of

principles which have been validated by modern sociology" (Levy & Philips 1951, p. 512-513).

Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court Lemuel Shaw, however, ultimately

siding with the White school committees' decision to enforce segregation, delivered the court's

unanimous opinion by setting forth the groundwork of the "separate but equal" principle for the

next 108 years:

> Conceding, therefore, in the fullest manner, that colored persons, the descend-ants
> of Africans, are entitled by law, in this commonwealth, to equal rights, constitutional
> and political, civil and social, the question then arises, whether the regulation in
> question, which provides separate schools for colored children, is a violation of any
> of these rights (59 Mass. 198, 206).

But unfortunately, "separate" in Boston was still not "equal" for Blacks because the

condition of the schools and its lack of resources were blatantly ignored there and elsewhere in

Black communities across the United States. Chief Justice Shaw's opinion justified racial

segregation and Jim Crow in the North. Bernstein (1962) notes that the Supreme Court and

several state courts subsequently referred to previous court cases, especially *Roberts v. City of*

Boston, to formulate its respective majority ruling opinions, including the landmark case *Plessy vs. Ferguson* - further justifying segregated education through "separate but equal" policies across states in the US (Levy & Philips, 1951) even after segregated schools in Massachusetts were eventually banned by the state legislature in 1855 - the first state to do so.

As tensions festered between the North and the South in the few decades following the Civil War especially considering the nationwide mixed acceptance of Reconstruction, higher socioeconomic status still did not eliminate racial inequities in segregation. Whites were clearly at an advantage because of their biased access to facilities and services that were clearly superior to those facilities and services reserved for Blacks. In 1890, Homer Plessy, a Black businessman and paying customer of almost entirely European descent, boarded a "whites-only" railroad car instead of the railroad car intended for Black passengers. His action violated the Louisiana Separate Car Act of 1890 where Black and Whites had to sit in racially segregated rail cars regardless of whether the railroad company was regulated by the state or not (1893). Plessy, a phenotypic White man who was seven-eighths White and one-eighth Black, was arrested. As a result, and with the help of his friends, his intentionally predetermined court case against the State of Louisiana began. Plessy's argument relied on his rights being violated under both the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments of the U.S. Constitution where he was not granted equal protection under the law. Drawing from the Reconstruction Era's Fourteenth Amendment, denying a White person the usage whiteness as property, and here as a privilege, violated Plessy's equal protection of the law. He self-identified as a White man but was arrested for not sitting in the inferior rail car reserved for Blacks. He lost the case because due to racialized laws addressing citizenship, a person was classified as Black if they had any amount of African ancestry in their lineage.

Determined to get justice, Plessy appealed his case against Louisiana Judge John Ferguson to the Supreme Court. During the Supreme Court case, Plessy's lawyers continued to argue that 1.) Plessy's rights were violated under the same Amendments that grant all U.S. citizens equal treatment under the law and 2.) Plessy's reputation as a [visible] white man was considered his own "property" and was devalued by the circumstances surrounding this incident in being classified as a Black man which was viewed with inferiority at the time, further depicting his mistreatment as a U.S. citizen (Bernstein, 1962). Upholding the State of Louisiana's Separate Car Act of 1890, which mandated separate but equal train cars for Blacks and Whites as being constitutional, the Supreme Court in 1896 ruled in favor of the previous lower court's decision, upholding "separate but equal" in the State of Louisiana (163 U.S. 537, 1896). The Supreme Court ruling upheld that states could have separate facilities and institutions for whites and non-whites as long as those facilities and institutions were equal. Throughout the United States and especially the South, states maintained the "separate" portion of the clause through racial discrimination and segregation by blatantly maintaining underfunded and dilapidated facilities – under the disguise of "equal." This court case further perpetuated discrimination in the US on the basis of race even in spite of class.

The *Roberts* and *Plessy* court decisions are examples of how, if not for anything else overall, preschool education ought to provide all children with the foundation to be successful in K-12 schooling and beyond as well as provide for upward social and economic mobility. The *Brown* decision applied to K-12 schooling options but certainly encompasses all of the schooling arrangements in the United States. Therefore, I agree with Morris' (2008) three conceptualizations of desegregation's premise. Desegregation was grounded by beliefs that:

> (1) [it] improved racial tensions would result from Black and White children
> attending schools together; (2) Black students – who were deemed culturally

> deprived - would adopt 'White middle-class' culture and values as a result of their contact with White students and teachers; and (3) Black students would receive greater access to resources and information networks in middle class, predominantly White, schools, consequently having opportunity paths and outcomes similar to those of White middle class students (Morris, 2008, p. 717).

Indirectly, the current study uncovered some of the White middle class resources, opportunities, and strategies that are embedded in navigating the early childhood education market and its array of curriculum models that may not be available or accessible in publicly funded preschool settings for Black families and communities. To be clear, this study does not aim to shape education policy by upholding White middle-class values and school choice behaviors as the measuring stick for non-White families. Nor does it aim to highlight White middle-class behaviors as the norm or status quo for Black families to strive toward. Instead, this study hopes to provide evidence to policymakers that parents approach and interact with the preschool market differently and that the exclusive prescription to Black and poor children of the one-size-fits-all, academic/cognitive forms of preschool curriculum are too narrow of a remedy for access to quality early education settings.

Project Head Start and Poverty Stereotypes

A key implication in this study is rooted in not just the decision for Black mothers to enroll their child in private preschool but also the reasons why they inherently would be choosing against enrollment in Georgia Pre-K, granted that one would be available. In Nashville for example, parents experienced a "pull" towards private school because they perceive private schools as a place where parent involvement and parent communication are valued compared to public schools (Goldring & Phillips, 2008). However in this study and given the history of how Black women have been negatively stigmatized in the U.S. school choice arena (Cooper, 2009), Black mothers may experience both a push away from those same public schools settings and a

concurrent pull towards private schools where their class status may eclipse the stigmas that come with race. This section will discuss the historical perceptions of poverty, early education, and Black women converge to supplement the social implications of Black mothers' private preschool choice today.

The first major beginning of federal influence on education as a solution to poverty started with President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty in 1964. With 19% poverty rate in the United States in the early 1960's, the premise to improve was rooted in the lack of education among the poor. Through programs like Head Start, Job Corps, and Project Follow Through, low-income and economically disadvantaged youth were given opportunities to learn job skills for the workforce. Career preparation, social and professional skills, and the confidence to enter the workforce for long-term employment were the main reasons the programs were installed. The following year was critical as President Johnson unveiled the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which included Project Head Start. Head Start is a federal program targeting families of young children from poor communities and gives those families access to early childhood education and other support services. The federal government still felt that there was a direct correlation between education and poverty. In fact, the correlation was inversely related where academic achievement decreased as child poverty increased and the solution was Head Start. The academic target areas were reading, writing, and mathematics. The premise of Head Start was that if the federal government provided early education and support for children from low-income and working-class families, then the cycle of poverty would be reduced. ESEA sought to directly address this problem by enacting this law that promoted equal access to education for all and sought to narrow the achievement gap.

But who is the face of poverty and what do these children look like? Beatty (2012) asserts that researchers have clearly delineated the "disadvantaged child" to automatically mean "the Black child" based on how preschool programs as an intervention were framed in the mid-1970's (p.2). In her analysis of pre-Head Start preschool programs we see that in the 1960s and 1970's preschool programs were eventually criticized for imposing White middle class stereotypes on poor Black children. Dr. Mamie Clark, whose work on the doll test that proved segregation caused negative psychological effects on young Black children and heavily influenced the *Brown* decision in 1954, said that "terms such as 'underprivileged' and 'deprived' created stereotypes that might function as rationales for low teacher expectations…" (Beatty, 2012, p. 26). Around the same time, the term "culturally deprived" or "deprived" became pervasive in mainstream education in the US in reference to both Black children. This further perpetuated the deficit style of thinking towards communities of color as they were compared against the dominant racial identity, White communities.

Whether implicitly or explicitly, the White middle-class child has been often held up as an example for African American students (Martinez & Rury, 2012). The deprivation label was based on the idea that poor children of color, Black or Brown, suffered significant delays in their intellectual growth because of lack of standard English spoken in their homes. Martinez and Rury (2012) explain that even though these terms were originally introduced in race-neutral contexts, the changing racial demographic landscape of urban areas in the US changed the terms' target to have specific racial implications towards Blacks Americans. Furthermore, by this time in the mid-1980s, *A Nation at Risk*, a critical report of the detrimental status of education in the US, was released and the term "at risk" became widely used. Using the term "at risk" had its covert conveniences as it did not necessarily mean a child or ethnic group were deficient per se.

Instead, it "merely indicates a greater likelihood of failure due to circumstances that are beyond the child's (or group's) control or that represent potentially debilitating influences to one degree or another" (Martinez & Rury, 2012, p.24). This coded language was very transparent to the communities of color it attempted to characterize, and it reflected how the White middle class values of US society prevail in schools. For example, Rashid (2009) asserts that Black boys are on a "perilous path" that stem from a broad range of societal issues that could be remedied by increasing access to quality early childhood education. What is rarely addressed, however are the contributing factors to what would make a child or community disadvantaged, the educational debt that US society owes to Black communities and communities of color who have historically not been treated equally (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

These and other forms of deficit ideology are problematic because "it defines the problem in terms of students' inabilities to achieve and their families' inabilities to help them achieve rather than the many barriers that impede achievement or the hegemony evident in the very way we construct the notion of 'achievement'" (Gorski, 2012, p. 313-314). I agree with Gorski (2012) in that poor (and Black) people have suffered from four specific stereotypes in the US: 1.) poor people do not value education, 2.) poor people are lazy, 3.) poor people are substance abusers, and 4.) poor people are linguistically deficient. Black mothers are no stranger to labels and stereotypes in the history of the United States. It comes as no surprise that those same pigeon-hole terms have been extended to Black mothers' children and communities. And these perceptions affect how Black parents approach school choice because they know and internalize how the world and schools around them may disparage their identity.

Next, Head Start's goal, as well as the goal of many states' targeted pre-kindergarten programs, was to provide nothing less than quality early education opportunities to the United

States' poorest and most vulnerable communities. However, those opportunities can only be utilized if there is equitable access to them. Given the vast early childhood education market coupled with the lack of access along racial and socioeconomic lines, scholars like Morabito and Vandenbroeck (2015) would call for a circumstance-oriented equality of opportunity (CEOp) approach. This is an example of a solution toward improving more equitable access for Black mothers in this current study and an example of how scholars note strategies to improve school choice. Because the socially and historically circumstances Black mothers experience, a CEOp approach asserts that both opportunities and choices are determined by circumstances (Morabito & Vandenbroeck, 2015). Therefore, the intersection or race and class applies here because an expansion of the opportunities and choices available to them in the early education marketplace, for example, would provide a more equitable playing field, compared to their White counterparts.

As I have illustrated above, Black mothers in the US and in this study due to either racial and/or socioeconomic positionings, often do not have the opportunity to choose among multiple quality childcare options. Instead, they are often relegated to enrolling their child in a care setting that is convenient and/or accessible, in cost and location, regardless of the whether the setting completely meets the mother's approval. A deficit ideology would blame Black mothers for enrolling their child in low quality preschool settings that could fail to maximize their child's development and school readiness skills. Equality of opportunity should start with meeting their needs in the context of access. The essence of a CEOp conceptualization would instead blame early education and school choice policies for not creating a system of measures that would redistribute quality access to benefit Black mothers who live in communities and/or have circumstances that hinder the same access to quality that White mothers' privilege.

Black Identity, Middle Class Status

To define the Black middle class is to explore a broad spectrum of social practices and empirical studies that overlap both race and class experiences in the historical context of the U.S. To begin, racial formation is defined as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (Omi & Winant, 1994, p.55). Nevertheless, the Black middle class live in the simultaneous interplay of privilege and vulnerability (Pattillo, 2013). Privilege would come from increased household income that can afford better quality education, for example, while the vulnerability comes from experience of enduring racism in the U.S. that cannot be avoided through that same income (Davis & Welcher, 2013). For Blacks in the U.S. regardless of income, a racial experience often involves discrimination. "Racial discrimination is no longer legal, but racism nonetheless continues to structure relations among groups and to differentiate the power that different groups have" (Anderson & Hill Collins, 2010, p.68). Additionally, class "involves attitudes and behaviors" and "is both about material and symbolic dimensions of social life, but, like race, the social class system is grounded in social institutions and practices" (p.71). The Black middle class identity encompasses both a racialized and income-driven lived experiences unique to American citizenship where the constant power struggle for equality couples with symbolic class-edifying behaviors and practices converge.

To illustrate, Lacy's (2007) study of the Black middle class in Washington, D.C. considered middle class status identifiers for Blacks to be comparable to the same status for Whites: similar occupation status, educational attainment, income, and housing. And, Pattillo's (2013) Chicago-based study also emphasized educational attainment where middle class status is conceptualized as having earned at least a bachelor's degree, where their degree would then warrant a white-collar occupation. Generally, for Blacks, middle class status encompasses

combinations of socioeconomic factors of income, occupation, and education coupled with normative judgments of place of residence, place of worship, and social venues (Pattillo, 2013). In short, the Black middle class comes with its "blessings and burdens," and still encompass both identities (Harris, 2013).

Toward a class identity, middle class status may also include certain values like a collective appreciation for creative expression and other art forms. Aligning with Bourdieu's *Judgements of Taste* (1984) where "art and cultural consumption are…to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences" (p.7), Banks (2012) illuminated how Black middle-class parents in Atlanta instill cultural capital with their children through exposure to Black art. Black identity and culture are reproduced in Harris' (2013) study of the Black middle class in Georgia and reflects transgenerational value representative of the identity of second-generation middle class Blacks in the U.S.

Coined as the "Cosby Cohort," this current generation of the Black middle class was born in the 1980's and 1990's and culturally relate with the children of *The Cosby Show*, a popular television sitcom featuring the family of a middle class couple, a Black female lawyer married to a Black male physician, growing up in a Brooklyn brownstone. This specific generation in the Black community, like the *Cosby* children, espouse their class status often with aspects of Black culture and identity that was prominent in the television program which aired from 1984-1992 with reruns well into the 2000's. A major emphasis in the show was exposing Black culture and higher socioeconomic status in the U.S. and how those values were scripted to affirm a positive Black and middle class identity within the family and greater community. However, "while middle-class Blacks are privileged by class, they must still deal with the realities of belonging to a racial minority group subject to racial discrimination (Harris, 2013, p.19). Most important,

Harris (2013) emphasized Black middle class identity as a Black cultural identity that defines, bounds, empowers and supports Blackness in spite of systemic racism yet also hinges on the social reproduction of Blacks' middle class status as survival.

Consistent with the importance of maintaining and balancing a Black cultural identity with middle class status, Lacy (2007) introduced researchers to the boundary work that the Black middle class performs to achieve strategic assimilation. Middle class Blacks construct and negotiate boundaries to their identity as they navigate and interact with Whites, whether at work or in public spaces, as well as Blacks of lower socioeconomic status. "These interactions with other racial and class groupings shape middle-class Blacks' conceptions of who they are" (Lacy, 2007, p.9). Additionally, middle class Blacks use boundary-work to emphasize similarities with the White middle-class while also displaying an affinity for their Black heritage (Meghi, 2017). Boundary-work opens the door for parents to exercise strategic assimilation, where middle class Blacks balance their lives between navigating a world surrounded by Whites in professional and educational settings while also maintaining and nurturing their connections to the Black community and therefore, Black cultural identity. Lacy (2007) describes it as "middle-class Blacks' intentionally limited incorporation into the White mainstream, a process that privileges maintaining strong ties to the Black community" (p.153). This applies to my study because enrollment in private pre-kindergarten settings may be a form of strategic assimilation for the Black middle-class mothers where they may want their children to interact with other middle-class White children from an early age in school while nurturing a positive self-identity in the home.

Moore's (2008) gentrification study on Black middle-class identity formations in metropolitan Philadelphia gleans two conceptualizations: Blacks who are middle-class minded or

multi-class. Here, Blacks of middle-class status are characterized as maintaining both a race and class identity, separated by the influence of their habitus, or edifying behaviors, as it relates to residential choice. Moore's (2008) conceptualization defined middle-class minded Blacks as those who find their identity within both Black and White middle-classes. Middle-class minded Blacks accepted or recognized their class differences between them and less privileged Blacks, they subscribed to the integrationist ideology, and were "interested in the neighborhood as an opportunity to amenities of middle-class lifestyle (i.e. urban gentrification) that have historically excluded Black people" (p.512). On the other hand, multi-class Blacks of middle-class status hold an identity that challenges the desirability of integration, view their neighborhood as a major factor to Black self-determination, and "demonstrate high racial solidarity…" (Moore, 2008, p.507). The current study seeks Black middle-class mothers who hold either identity of what it means to be Black and middle-class as it will provide diverse and rich data and simultaneously speak to how they view private pre-kindergarten's purpose.

Black Mothers' Resilience in Child Advocacy

Black women and mothers, the target racial demographic for this study, have often been perceived from a deficit model with dominant discourses perpetuating images of poor, lazy, uncultured women unable to fend for themselves and their children, who may have been born "out of wedlock" (Cooper, 2005). Indeed, these pathologizing tactics stem from the historically racist and sexist ideologies used to oppress Black communities by psychologically attacking the African American experience. Countering the negative and stereotypical depictions of Black mothers have become integral to the way research and policy is shaped (O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007). However, research around African American mothers in the education context shows the continuation of framing Black mothers from a place of ignorance and depoliticization.

Therefore, exploring the preschool choice decision-making of African American mothers and their socioeconomic status justifies another look at how the intersection of race and class fuels their distinct impressions and choices in the US education marketplace. Their decisions are not made in a vacuum and warrant examination because how they choose schools for their youngest children may show school choice policy makers and advocates how soon those inequities in school choice take effect - and how Black mothers view (pre)schools in the US may reflect their resilience to historical and social mistreatment.

In light of that resilience, Black mothers have instead been revered for their courage in child rearing and advocacy, as well as their parental involvement in their children's schooling. In spite of the structural conditions and racial discrimination faced by African Americans, Cooper and McCoy (2009) remind us:

> Since the 1950s, African Americans have made tremendous social and political gains as a result of civil rights activism and hard fought legal victories; yet, full legal citizenship has not always come with substantive citizenship – meaning the ability to fully participate and access American sociopolitical systems" (pp. 47-48).

In this study, the sociopolitical system is the early childhood education marketplace. But Wilson (2014) poignantly reminds academia that Black mothers' leadership and child advocacy have been greatly overshadowed by patriarchal retellings of the civil rights era. Indeed, Black mothers and women from 1954 to 1971 were "steadfast and kept their focus on the integrating children [as] they engaged in numerous acts of care that helped sustain these students' courage and will" during mandatory desegregation (Wilson, 2014, p. 42). During this era, Black mothers utilized the capital that they had in order to achieve the overall implementation of *Brown* - the monitored safety of integrating children, and the provision of moral support to integrating children (Wilson, 2014). These women took on tasks and responsibilities on a regular basis that often included

going above and beyond what White mothers did for their children just so Black children would feel safe and secure amidst the pro-segregation protesters. And just like my mother who integrated Fredrick Sasser High School, these Black mothers exerted their school choice and educational rights and modeled teaching political resistance to their children while further emphasizing "their sense of personal accountability for protecting their children, seeking increased educational and life opportunities for them, and nurturing their feelings of pride and dignity" (Wilson, 2014, p. 44).

As slavery and segregation were means to contain or restrict economic and political advancement in the infancy of the United States, remnants of that oppressive system have been riding the coat tails of the post-*Brown* era. In this study, I will be exploring how African American mothers navigate the sociopolitical system of school choice for their children. Given this historical context of African Americans in the US, the path and options for school choice are still very different for African American mothers compared to White mothers. Regardless of socioeconomic status, resilience to educational inequities has employed the act of shadowboxing where "African American women negotiate complex identities as they interface with society and oppose interlocking forms [of] racial, class, and gender oppression" (Cooper & McCoy, 2009, p.52). This type of resilience stems from Black women's dissatisfaction with their place in mainstream society and is reflected in acts of motherwork (Cooper, 2007).

Motherwork, which complements shadowboxing, is the central form a resistance that stems from the lived inequities as experienced by African American mothers who in turn apply that which they continue to live through in their identity in order to provide opportunities for their children to also grow to resist the same societal inequities (Cooper, 2007; Cooper & McCoy, 2009). It is "a resistance tradition that reflects the women's distinct concerns about

raising their children to have a sense of personal and cultural pride and negotiate inequitable socioeconomic and political systems so they can prosper" (Cooper & McCoy, 2009, p. 53). I conceptualize motherwork as a holistic yearning that is put into action where positive racial identity, self-determination, survival, and educational opportunity intersect for resistance purposes and upward mobility goals. White middle-class mothers, on the other hand, have more power, privilege, and resources and will never have to confront racism from school administrators and educators – particularly in the area of parent involvement (Byrne, 2009; Cooper, 2007). Therefore, examining school choice decision-making must not come from a one-size-fits all approach. Instead, contextual frameworks that center the race- and class-based lived experiences are best suited for understanding how African American mothers make school-related decisions for their children.

This current study also draws from Cooper's (2007) work in understanding the navigation of African American mothers' school choices in an urban setting. It differs in that her study involved mothers who chose either public or charter/private middle schools, whereas this study solely focuses on mothers who chose private preschool settings. It also differs in sample size in that the study consisted of fourteen total low-income and working-class participants and this study had a total of twelve middle income participants. It is similar, however, in that Cooper's (2007) study included six (out of the fourteen) mothers who chose urban private school settings and this study had twelve total parents representing multiple urban private preschool arrangements for their children.

Similar, to the lived experiences of the Black mothers before and after the *Brown* decision, Cooper's (2007) study emphasized themes of survival, power, and identity as central factors in choice-making and child advocacy. Black mothers assert that choice-making,

advocacy, and resistance are power-based and reflect racialized, gendered, and class-based

oppression. This is because they felt the need to remain vigilant in their parent involvement to

ensure that their child's life chances are not hindered by educational inequities as experienced

through the unbalanced school choice process (Cooper, 2007). Thus, mothers as maternal

guardians make "positioned school choices" as their school choice process inherently means

competing for the power to choose, often battling against educators and education policy-makers

who judge African American mothers' decisions based on Anglo-centric norms while

discounting sociocultural context (Cooper, 2005; 2007).

School choice not only reflects resources and capital for parents but also racial

composition (Cooper, 2007; Shlay, Tran, Weinraub, & Harmon, 2005). Cooper's (2005) study of

Black mothers showed that a school's racial composition is important because it helps children

gain "cultural exposure" and serves as a survival skill that Black children should master while

living in a diverse society (Cooper, 2005, p. 182). In leveling the playing field of educational

opportunity, mothers felt their disadvantaged position of race and socioeconomic status may not

felt as harshly for their children if they attend racially and economically diverse schools with

better resources. Furthermore, Cooper's (2005) study highlights mothers who chose private

schools because of the rigorous curriculum, small school and class size, and better personalized

child sensitivity and compassion towards the struggles that children may bring to the class setting

(Cooper, 2005).

In again emphasizing the educational bias in favor of White middle class mothers as the

standard for all parents' educational involvement, Cooper (2009) asserts how

womanism/humanism for Black mothers serves to reflect their efforts to advocate for

marginalized Black children, families, and communities, as justice and care are equal priorities

for them. Racial and cultural nuances need to be considered when examining school choice and parent involvement in a racial diverse setting. Education and school choice advocates should be attuned to Black mothers' accounts of working to fight and sacrifice for their children success and independence (Cooper, 2007, 2009). This "fight" thwarts the "leveled playing field" intentions of school choice because rational school choice decision-making clearly underemphasizes the power dynamics that have race and class-based implications.

The results of these and other of Black mother studies reflect the mothers' "racialized, gendered and class-based identities intersect and greatly influence how they socially construct their parent involvement role" (Cooper, 2007, p. 507). I assert that for the mothers in this current study, as maternal guardians they will be making "positioned school choices" as their preschool choice process inherently means competing for the power to choose, often battling against educators and education policy-makers who judge African American mothers' decisions based on Anglo-centric norms while discounting sociocultural context (Cooper, 2007).

Black Mothers and Preschool Choice/Desired Characteristics

Inequities in education have persisted in the U.S. and it has affected school choice options among disadvantaged communities of color, negatively impacting the legacy of the *Brown* decision. As the literature on preschool and early education choice is vast, it almost entirely focuses on parents from low-income backgrounds – and this holds true for studies of Black parents. Literature is also sparse for preschool choice in the context of middle- and upper-income Black parents. This section will show how (mostly low-income) Black parents view preschool settings and what characteristics they look for when deciding. Given the absence of research on preschool choice along socioeconomic lines for this demographic, we will see how Black parents choose preschools in general along racial lines. Overall however, parents often

choose the school that is closest to their home or the most convenient to their work schedule (Chaudry et al., 2011; Weinraub, Shlay, Harmon, & Tran, 2005). However, the closest or most convenient school setting is not always the best quality (Fram & Kim, 2008; Iruka and Morgan 2014). Exposure to a quality education, even from the earliest stages, can have long-term implications on student achievement (Barnett, 2008). Nevertheless, the parents, and more specifically the mothers, are an integral force in childcare selection, regardless of income or socioeconomic status (Cooper, 2007).

A variety of factors contribute to Black parents as decision makers for their children's childcare. Shlay, Tran, Weinraub, and Harmon (2005) found that Black parents believe quality of care should focus on the caregiving environment, qualifications, experience, as well as the training and behavior of the child care provider. Parents also wanted their children in classrooms with mixed socioeconomic status, or all Black, or racial mixed classrooms - not classrooms that were predominantly White (Shlay et al., 2005). Features that were valued included child safety and sanitation, how their children interacted with their provider, and the experience of the caregiver in caring for children.

These characteristics still hold true when Weinraub et al. (2005) interviewed 111 Black parents from low-income backgrounds. The result of their study showed when these parents receive child care subsidies the were more likely to use center care, less likely to use relative care, and more likely to enroll their child in a licensed and registered child care arrangement. Due to place of residence, however, the average level of child care was below average pointing to inequities in a community context when parents are in search of the best available child care (Weinraub et al., 2005).

Forry, Simkin, Wheeler, and Bock (2013) interviewed forty Black parents in Maryland about their childcare preferences and perceptions of quality. Similar to Cooper's (2005; 2007) findings, distrust for child care providers was pervasive as parents valued provider-child interactions, active provider engagement with the children, and how children are disciplined in care settings (Forry et al., 2013). Similar to findings from a study by Holloway, Rambaud, Fuller, and Eggers-Piérola (1995), Black parents also placed emphasis on the promotion of their children's academic skills through didactic or teacher-led instruction (Forry et al., 2013). Other top characteristics included availability, health and safety, cost, and structured learning in the classroom environment (Forry et al., 2013).

Again, research involving child care choice is often framed around low-income mothers of color and their decision-making. Tang, Coley, and Votruba-Drzal (2012) used data from a longitudinal study, the Three-City Study, addressing the well-being of low-income children and families following welfare reform to assess the factors that economically disadvantaged families weigh to predict the type of childcare the families used. Out of the full sample participants, 94% were either Latina or Black (54% and 40% respectively). For one, children age 2-6 were more likely to be enrolled in center-based care like Head Start compared to maternal care. African American mothers were more likely than Latina mothers to enroll their child in center-based care, as race and ethnicity were significant predictors of childcare choice (Tang, Coley, and Vatruba-Drzal, 2012). Also, language and culture of the caregiver along with class size were also found as important predictors of childcare choice among low-income families of color in this study. Mothers with more advanced literacy skills were positively correlated to center-based care as well. Even though low-income families do not get all of their preferences met in a desired ECE setting as a convenience to aid with maternal employment and care location in this study,

maternal psychological distress, quality of parenting, cognitive stimulation in the home as well as factors like family income, welfare receipt, family structure did not play significant roles in school choice decision-making. However, families with multiple young children in the household were more likely to use home-based ECE care. The lack of access to more quality opportunities was highlighted as a difficult goal at times because even with nearby quality schooling, working families often find it hard to schedule drop-off and pick-up times with their inflexible work schedules (Tang, Coley, and Vatruba-Drzal, 2012).

In line with certain aspects to the work of Tang, Coley, and Votruba-Drzal (2012), Radey and Brewster's study (2007) asserts how "race and ethnicity are associated with many of the constraints on parents' child care choices, including income, household composition, residential location, and employment characteristics" (p.381). Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, Radey and Brewster (2007) sought to investigate whether or not Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites (n=1871) would choose the same ECE care if all faced the same comparable structural constraints as mothers of 1-year old children. Focusing specifically on Black mothers, there were less instances of relative care, higher levels of center-based care, and lower levels of non-family care compared to Whites or Hispanics (Radey & Brewster, 2007). Even though Black mothers were less likely than White mothers to rely on maternal relatives for childcare, Black single working mothers "have the highest probability of reliance on the child's father for child care" due in part to their having the highest likelihood (61%) to still be friends with the child's father compared to 50% for Whites and Hispanics (Radey & Brewster, 2007, p.390). Lastly, both Black and White working mothers living at least 200% above the poverty level were more likely to use non-family day care compared to poor and near-poor counterparts. This reflects the existing correlation between maternal educational attainment and the possibility

that both Black and White women are increasingly using their eligibility for subsidized early care for their children (Radey & Brewster, 2007).

In the context of preschool choice and educational attainment, the research shows that the more education a mother has the more likely they are to enroll their child in center-based childcare compared to children of less educated mothers (Grogan, 2012). The maternal education attainment levels are also correlated to their child's academic achievement (Greenburg, 2011). Because of a mother's education, the higher the attainment the more likely the mother will maintain beliefs and values that shape what their child needs for academic success. Less educated mothers are less likely to emphasize education in the home where language and literacy are critical to children's development. Greenburg's (2011) analysis suggests that higher educated mothers with higher incomes also have the financial resources to choose among cost-associated center-based programs for their preschool children. Higher quality care often comes at a price, as more educated mothers have more knowledge of both what to look for in the characteristics of quality care and the long-term benefits that quality center-based care provides. More specifically, the research also suggests to more educated mothers possessing the awareness of the perpetual preparedness that high-quality centers provided to children prior to entering compulsory schooling (Grogan, 2012). This may be the reason why Black children were more likely than other ethnicities to be enrolled in center-based care like Head Start (Greenberg, 2011). Among low-income parents however, work-related reasons and children's growth and development opportunities are the largest contributing variables for parents' choice in childcare. Reflecting the existing literature, the Fram and Kim's (2009) study shows that more educated mothers are more critical in selecting a childcare center, focusing on learning quality. They are also less likely to weigh childcare costs due to a higher

household income. Conversely, parents with lower household incomes are more likely to weigh cost, location, and hours of operation (factors considered to be practical) in their decision-making because of the parents working hours and proximity to home (Fram & Kim, 2009; Tang, Coley, and Votruba-Drzal, 2012).

Again, Grogan (2012) found that parents with greater educational attainment and higher income are more likely to value quality factors when choosing preschool settings, adding to the literature that socioeconomic status can influence decision-making. Grogan (2012) also sought to identify parents' considerations for choosing preschool programs for their preschool-aged child (three-years old) in light of child, family, and other contexts. Of the 203 participants however, there were majority responses from Black parents (n=123). The findings show that parents value indicators of quality and the program's practical aspects as factors of value in ECE schooling choices. Low-income families with progressive beliefs were also more likely to consider quality indicators in making their choice (Grogan, 2012). Also, those who valued the quality of a childcare setting also were similar in other contextual factors such as socioeconomic status, childrearing, only child status, parent involvement, as well as children's numeracy and literacy skills (Grogan, 2012). The study suggest that socioeconomic status plays such a role that preschool choice may also be correlated to the parents' perceived academic skills of the child where a lower performing child may have parents who are less informed about indicators of quality in choosing a preschool (Grogan, 2012).

For this current study, I will be paying particular attention to maternal educational attainment and socioeconomic status as it relates to private preschool choice. School choice represents the desire for the best available education for children to properly develop, learn, and mature in safe environments. Features in preschool settings may be distinctly identified and

sought out by parents of certain income levels. These characteristics may or may not reflect what the literature current reveals but may uncover the underlying value system that middle-income Black mothers employ when critically choosing preschool settings for their children.

Race and Black Mothers' Children in Preschool Choice

Historically, race is a factor in school choice for parents of Black children, not only for the sake of the children's acceptance but also for their cultural identity (Morris, 2008; Wilson, 2014). And because of race, schools with predominantly Black student and teachers are perceived as low quality while schools with predominantly White students is perceived as being better (Sikkink & Emerson, 2008). On the contrary, schools with predominantly Black faculty and student body pre- and post-*Brown* have been sites of cultural validation, warmth, community affirmation, and academic rigor (Morris, 2008; Wilson, 2014). Clearly however, many parents desire for schools to have a high amount of Black bodies in the building for the benefit of their child's development (Shlay et al., 2005; Sikkink & Emerson, 2008).

For example, Williams, Banerjee, Lozada-Smith, Lambouths III, and Rowley (2017) interviewed Black middle class mothers to understand their perceptions of the role race plays in their child's (age 5 to 7 years old) education and found that only 25% of parents said that race would play no role or minimal role in their education. However, mothers also expressed concern about the possibility of discriminatory treatment and a mismatch between racial socialization at school and at home. A teacher's racial identity also became a critical concern as parents were aware that White teachers may bring biases and stereotypes that manifest themselves in teachers' behaviors toward and perceptions of Black children as they enter first grade (Williams et al., 2017). Though the parents' responses varied about the extent to which race would be a factor in

their young children's schooling experiences, they all accepted the role of intervening whenever race would begin to shape the children's educational experiences (Williams et al., 2017).

Most of middle class Black mothers in a study conducted by Suizzo, Robinson, and Pahlke (2008) revealed that teaching their children (ages 3- 6 years old) about African American history and their heritage was an important part of helping children understand what it meant to be African American. Additional themes included the need for promoting educational achievement as a means to overcome barriers of racism and promoting autonomy while maintaining close family relationships (Suizzo, Robinson, and Pahlke, 2008). In highlighting the importance of positive racial socializations techniques like relevant books and television programs, parents "demonstrated a clear understanding of how racism shapes their children's daily experiences in social settings and, consequently, their own strategies for rearing healthy children in a racist society" (Suizzo, Robinson, and Pahlke, 2008, p. 307). These Black mothers also voiced their high educational attainment aspirations for their young children so they can be self-sufficient as the mothers "aimed at ensuring their children's autonomy and ability to remain free, in spite of the continued racial discrimination they will likely face (Suizzo, Robinson, and Pahlke, 2008, p. 309). These desires by Black parents for their children's' independence through education as resistance against racism is evident in the conceptualization of critical race achievement ideology as the parents here value both independence and interdependence (Carter, 2008; Fisher, 2015).

These racialization beliefs are further edified in a study conducted by Edwards and Few-Demo (2016). In interviewing twelve African American mother from working class and middle income backgrounds, we see that Black mothers view the racial socialization of their children (ages 3-5 years old) involves doing mothering and motherwork as conscientization (Edwards &

Few-Demo, 2016), reflecting again the critical work that mothers do to advocate for their young

children (Cooper, 2005; 2007). These mothers were aware of the societal stereotypes of Black

mothers – angry mother, promiscuous mother, and welfare mother – and managed to counter that

narrative by using developmentally appropriate strategies and message and using a critical

reflexivity about their child's social environments (Edwards & Few-Demo, 2016). Furthermore,

Edwards and Few- Demo (2016) found that Black mothers were very protective of the images

and messages of race that their children would be exposed to so much that they would make

active, conscious choices in anti-racist strategies as a defense for their children all while still

emphasizing egalitarian socialization strategies.

Georgia Pre-K and School Readiness

As states are aligning their preschool curriculums with K-12 standards, state-run pre-

kindergarten programs are overwhelmingly didactic, and Georgia Pre-K is very similar. Georgia

Pre-K, however, has been upheld for its positive effects on school readiness skills in students.

Historically for example, a 1996 survey of parents with children enrolled in GA Pre-K showed

that parents were overall satisfied with the program with most parents believing children learning

to play with other children (a social-emotional indicator) was a priority for almost all the parents,

but only 50% believed the program should be teaching children how to read (Basile & Henry,

1996). The survey also revealed additional insights – African American parents when compared

to White parents in the survey had higher expectations for their children, rated a higher need for

developmental play (drawing, painting, building blocks, etc.) and learning more vocabulary,

believed they did not see many of the benefits from their child's pre-k enrollment, and therefore

had higher expectations for the program and "seemed to want to get more out of the program

than they seemed to be getting" (Basile & Henry, 2006, p.15). Also, 2001 study of the Georgia

Pre-K Program's effectiveness in comparison to Head Start and private preschools showed that children in Georgia Pre-K caught up to private preschoolers on all school readiness assessments and were found to be better prepared for kindergarten compared to Head Start students, based on most language and cognitive assessments (Henry, Henderson, Ponder, Gordon, Mashburn, & Rickman, 2001).

Results from a 2011-2012 evaluation study showed that in spite of medium quality ratings in teacher-child interactions of emotional support, children in GA Pre-K showed growth in the areas of language and literacy skills, math skills, and behavioral skills (Peisner☐Feinberg, Schaaf, & LaForett, 2013). Furthermore, a longitudinal study tracking students from GA Pre-K through first grade showed that students exposed to GA Pre-K made significant gains in language, literacy, math, and behavioral skills as about 72% of pre-k classrooms scored in the high range for the process quality indicator of Emotional Support while about half scored in the low and middle range of quality for Instructional Support (Peisner-Feinberg, Mokrova, & Anderson, 2017).

Alongside Georgia's well-documented record of preparing its youngest students for school is Georgia's challenge to provide quality early education experiences to all of its four-year olds, particularly from Black communities (Bassok & Galdo, 2016). "For all characteristics for which there are differences across communities, the communities with higher rates of poverty and higher proportions of Black residents are more likely to have classrooms with lower levels of process quality" (Bassok & Galdo, 2016, p.137). As I have shown above, Georgia indeed has a consistent and successful pre-kindergarten program that prepares students for kindergarten, yet availability of access to quality and not just availability to slots for low-income and Black communities continues to be an unrelenting test. Possibly due to a response to the market where

GA Pre-K targets higher availability for specifically low-income communities, Bassok & Galdo's (2016) findings reveal how access to public preschool opportunities in Georgia is actually highest in low-income communities but parents in more affluent communities, however, may prefer to use private child care options. This current study seeks to address the factors that lead to the decision for Black middle-income parents to instead find suitable child care in the private sector in light of the fact that in Black communities there are higher levels of access to pre-k slots but lower levels of access to quality pre-k slots.

Pierre Bourdieu's Capital and Judgments of Taste

Pierre Bourdieu was a French sociologist who has served academia with critical perspectives on the elements that comprise class identities in society. Specifically, he has presented sociologists and other scholars with tools to conceptualize the ways in which socioeconomic status or class come to identify and define what it is that could possibly encompass the identities of the affluent in 1960s Paris, France and how that mirrors the identities of the affluent in Western societies (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu (1984) explains that individuals' class status as a social construct is a power dynamic and represents the overlapping conditions of existence, sets of dispositions and preferences, and can reproduce the actions that reflect that status in public settings. An individual's class position is social constructed relative to others whose lives are similarly affected by the objective conditions of existence. That includes the social conditions of lived experiences through race, ethnicity, geographical location, and gender (Horvat, 2003). To be fully privileged in the United States was to be fully White. Qualifying for the privileges of access would mean that a person's whiteness serves as the measuring stick. Bourdieu knew race impacted social class status for Blacks because they were not White and therefore unqualified for access to the privileges that whiteness creates. "Just as all segregation

(by sex or any other criterion) tends to slow down devaluation by its *numerus clausus* effect, …

an American study of the effects of racial segregation has shown, the least qualified are the ones

who feel the effects most directly" (Bourdieu, 1984, p.134, italics in original). Here, Bourdieu

centers education as the main catalyzer for social class reproduction along racial lines.

Education for Bourdieu is also a sustainer and perpetuator of social class positioning – social

class status is edified by social class reproduction through access to specific forms of education.

For middle class mothers to make the distinction between Georgia Pre-K and private pre-

k speaks to the level of taste they have in available/accessible schooling options. The mothers in

this study discern between what is universally available to the public and that which is

exclusively available by income. Taste, therefore, is "the propensity and capacity to appropriate

(materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices [and] is

the generative form of life-style" (Bourdieu, 1984, p.173). Taste represents the power to choose

and is discriminatory in choosing because it psychologically requires those with upper class taste

to make a choice among class-based identifiers to justify one's upper class status. One's taste in

private preschools and therefore, their school choice decision making, is intrinsically tied to their

class status, and subsequently, social class reproduction through their children's private school

enrollment. In light of this phenomenon, Bourdieu continues to show the scope of taste in that it:

> transforms objectively classified practices, in which a class condition signifies
> expression of class position, by perceiving them in their mutual relations and in
> terms of social classificatory schemes. Taste is thus the source of the system of
> distinctive features which cannot fail to be perceived as a systematic expression of
> a particular class of conditions of existence…(Bourdieu, 1984, p.175).

This current study examines the "system of distinctive features" of private pre-

kindergarten and how the social reproduction strategies of the Black middle class may speak to

how "those who feel the effects of segregation" choose private schooling for their children as a

"condition of existence" of their middle class status. Because of the racist history of the US, middle class status may mean more to Black parents than to white parents. And not the pursuit of education, but the selection of private schooling specifically may speak to how parents reproduce class status, even in young children. Policy makers who advocate for school choice models for public education in the US may want to reconsider how private provision of preschool speaks to class perpetuation and not simply rational decision making for parents and families. To be Black and middle class means something in school choice but to be white and middle class means something different. Nevertheless, to understand the "systematic expressions of the conditions of existence" of the more affluent class statuses in the US, I first must explain Bourdieu's conceptions of habitus, capital, field, and practice which are elements that define the essence of one's class status.

Habitus represents the internalized representation of societal rules (Horvat, 2003). Bourdieu refers to it "as a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which…function at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 82-83). Habitus explains not only the reason why parents respond or act but also how and why they do so. And habitus starts very early in the home and in society. Swartz (1997) believes the perceptions and actions of habitus are "derived from the predominantly unconscious internalization, particularly during early childhood, of object chances that are common to members of a social class or status group" (p.104). In this study, the act of private preschool choice stems from a parent's habitus or the way they subconsciously see their own place in the world, how they react to it, and why. As Swartz (1997) notes, we can see Bourdieu emphasized class reproduction's impact starts from an early age as habitus starts with young children. And from an early age, we can see how class-based values are instilled in children as their habitus can

be reflected in their speech patterns, dialect, social interactions, play, clothing, grammar, and assumed life trajectory. Middle class habitus for children is transmitted in the home where a key component of the dominant habitus is a positive attitude towards education (Sullivan, 2002). Furthermore, habitus is a system of embodied disposition which generate practice in accordance with the structural principles of the social world (Nash, 1990). "The habitus is the mechanism by which individuals develop a sense of their place in the world and the availability or accessibility of a variety of social worlds. It represents an individual's internalization of possibility" (Horvat, 2003, p.7). In summary, habitus is what behaviorally and aesthetically separate the have's from the have-nots. It defines how an individual responds to what they perceive to be their place in the world, how the social structures of society (in)validate and (de)value that place, and how their place in world can propel or hinder their social mobility.

Capital is a form of power in a given field or social setting (Bourdieu, 1987). There are different forms of capital (social, educational, economic, cultural, etc.) but cultural capital is what gets the most attention in Bourdieu's work. Horvat (2003) sees cultural capital as cultural resources such as high-status cultural knowledge about art or music, or mannerisms and practices that have high status value, or educational credentials that can serve to access power for an individual (Horvat, 2003). Cultural capital comes in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Embodied capital refers to the dispositions of the mind and body or how one thinks and behaves in certain settings, the objectified form represents cultural goods or items that can be purchased, and the institutionalized form represents academic qualifications and educational credentials (Nash, 1990). Also, social capital, the social network and connections within society used for particular purposes like access, is "recognized as a distinctive resource together with financial and cultural capital" (Nash, 1990, p.432). In education, cultural capital is

measured on its familiarity with dominant culture in society as the possession of cultural capital

varies with social class (Sullivan, 2002). Bourdieu believes that cultural capital is instilled in the

homes of higher-class students which enables students from middle- and upper-class homes to

attain higher educational credentials compared to students from lower income households.

Sullivan (2002) asserts that as the education system values the cultural capital of the dominant

white middle class, students with white middle class backgrounds will be looked upon more

favorably than poor students and students of color (Byrne, 2009). Bourdieu (1974) claims that

social inequalities are consequently legitimated by the educational credentials held by those in

dominant positions, therefore allowing the education system to play a key role in maintaining the

status quo.

Field determines where the above forms of capital can be activated. As it relates to the

struggle to maintain or advance one's social class status, the field of interaction is where

individuals enact their habitus and capital. Fields of interaction have their own system of

valuation and practice, but all social or cultural capital does not have the same value in a given

field, according to one's habitus (Horvat, 2003). "Fields present themselves systematically as

structured spaces of positions (or posts) whose properties depend on their positions within these

spaces and which can be analysed independently of the characteristics of their occupants"

(Bourdieu, 1993, p.72). Field is wherever class dynamics interact with one another and where

social and other forms of capital are activated and transferred. For this study concerning private

preschool choice, field represents where ever education choices are discussed and made. Not

surprising, fields can also be places of conflict and competition evident in the level of interaction

among members of particular social classes. The value of capital is dependent on the specific

field or interaction and the habitus of the individual displaying or activating the capital (Horvat,

2002). Field in this study can also refer to the brick and mortar private preschool setting that parents choose. Black mothers' private preschool choice stems from their embodied habitus and the capital that they activate so their child can be enrolled in the desired field, the private preschool.

The final element, practice, constitutes the actions taken by individual actors or players in fields of interaction (Horvat, 2002). Habitus and capital interact within a field of interaction to produce practice. Practice "is shaped by multiple forces interacting together including the rules governing the field as well as the relative positions of players in this field" and represents the "action taken given the everyday sense-making over time in which individuals engage." (Horvat, 2002, p.9). According to Horvat (2002), urban settings that are rich in diversity play a role in educational opportunity because the habitus and everyday practice are influenced by a wide variety of factors that together influence individual actions.

In this study, the distinction of middle income Black mothers in Georgia to choose private pre-kindergarten settings for their children will be explored. I will be considering the individual and collective habitus of their racial and class related identities, their lived experiences in the Georgia early education market, the forms of capital they accumulate and galvanize which influence their educational choices, the (privatized) field of the early childhood education marketplace, as well as the practice of enrolling their child in that private prekindergarten field.

The goal of the study is not to necessarily explore Black middle-class mothers' decision-making of private preschool alone but to also understand the ways in which these mothers uncover the rules of child care choice and the power dynamics that govern successful enrollment in accessible ECE settings.

Chapter Summary

Black families have long sojourned for equitable access to quality education in the United States. Racism and oppression have fueled the historic in equities that hinder that access. To navigate and access the best available education, some Black middle class parents have opted to send their children to private schools. This study focuses on the Black middle class parents who enrolled their children in private preschool settings.

Inequities in education were evident in segregation and the remnants of access linger today. Desegregation would have leveled the playing field in theory, but class-based indicators prevent low-income families access better schools. Income also plays a role in that residential choice is directly affected. This is important because better resourced schools tend to be in more affluent, White neighborhoods. Quality education is found in the Black communities yet access to quality preschool in Georgia for Black families is often found outside of Black communities. Stereotypes around access and quality also influence preschool decision-making and furthermore influence a Black habitus and Black identity in the context of education.

Resilience in the Black community is reflected in the mothers who exert child advocacy in their school choice. Black parents want for their children the same early childhood education experiences as White parents, but income can prevent access. As Black mothers often make positioned school choices for their children, the desired characteristics of a preschool are not always met. The balance of quality and access affect these choices when income is introduced in that in broadens the preschool enrollment availability and deepens the concept of quality early childhood education. However, parents generally want their children to be prepared for a successful K-12 matriculation. Social emotional development is critical to that school readiness desire.

Georgia offers a universal pre-kindergarten program that has been empirically proven to prepare it students for kindergarten. However, stereotypes and perceived level of quality are mixed for some parents. This is when judgements of taste in preschool settings come to play where perceptions of quality are not as clearly defined and heavily depend on a parent's social network. The goal of this study is to explore the reasons why Black middle-class parents chose to enroll their children in private preschool and to understand their perceptions of quality and school readiness.

Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality

As a theoretical framework, intersectionality helps researchers conduct studies to understand the layered and multidimensional nature of injustice and inequity – not as individual issues but as systemic problems (Crenshaw, 1989; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). As socially constructed identities, the examination of how and to what extent different identities including race and class are correlated and overlap is called intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality is a useful lens because it helps to describe the way people's identities overlap and the meaning they make from it in context of the world around them. In this study, I will be conceptualizing the private preschool choice decision-making of middle-class Black mothers by considering the intersection of race (Black) and class (middle-income) as they become evident during the data analysis process. Furthermore, "intersectionality foregrounds a richer and more complex ontology than approaches attempt to reduce people to one category at a time…and indicates that fruitful knowledge production must treat social positions as relational" (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018, p. 210). When researchers consider a parent's class identity and racial identity both collectively and respectively, it can glean useful meanings of interpreting the

way they experience everyday life. In this study, the focus centered on the implications behind how the intersection of their race/class identities influenced both their process of selecting a private preschool as well as their perceptions of preschool quality and school readiness.

For example, Bassok and Galdo (2016) have shown that Black mothers living in predominantly Black communities would be more susceptible to enrolling their children in low quality pre-kindergarten settings compared to parents in more affluent White communities where there is higher access to better ECE settings. And, Davis and Welcher (2013) claim that due to residential segregation, Black middle-class parents are more likely to attend poorer quality schools than middle class Whites. As social inquiry, this case study investigated the intersection of some of the "multitude of unexpressible associations" assigned to objects and events of the participants' race and class experiences in their navigation of the early childhood education market (Stake, 1978).

Intersectionality is important the way in which researchers look at the effects of how overlapping identities come to form one's decision-making. In a recent interview (Steinmetz, 2020), Crenshaw described her contemporary definition of intersectionality, given the term's thirty-year influence: "It's basically a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What's often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts." Using intersectionality as a prism to observe the inequalities in access to quality Georgia Pre-K settings and the selection of private settings will help theorize my data analysis as I will be specifically looking for data that speaks to how this intersection guides my study participants' decision making and perceptions. To

illustrate the racial position of intersectionality, the literature below will address the race implications of preschool choice for the Black community and the historically racialized marginalization of Black mothers in the school choice context. To address the class position of intersectionality, I will employ Pierre Bourdieu's viewpoints about class-based judgements of taste in education (Bourdieu, 1979). As intersectionality focuses on the subjective experiences that parents live out, it was important for the researcher to investigate this phenomenon with a methodology, like constructivist grounded theory, that considers how those experiences can be best examined.

CHAPTER III
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY
"His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him."
– Exodus 2:4

The purpose of this case study was to examine the reasons and perceptions that surround the decision-making process of Black middle class mothers who choose to enroll their child in private pre-kindergarten in Georgia. Exposure to pre-kindergarten has shown to improve school readiness skills and social-emotional skills (Nores & Barnett, 2014; Weiland, Ulvesta, Sachs, & Yoshikawa, 2013). Black women have long believed that schools hold on to negative stereotypes of them and do not value their roles in parent and school choice (Cooper, 2005; 2007). Yet, students from low-income and Black communities have less access to quality pre-kindergarten settings (Bassok & Galdo, 2016) while middle class families also struggle to find early education settings (Shulman & Barnett, 2005). The goal of the study was to understand the influence socioeconomic status and race may have in the early childhood education market of preschool choice. The study examined the way that class intersects with race in not only choosing to enroll their child in a private pre-k setting but also the reasons for these parents to therefore perhaps choose against enrolling their child in the universal Georgia Pre-K program. Furthermore, this study sought to uncover the perceptions of school readiness in the context of the public vs. private provision of pre-kindergarten. In reference to the passage above, I, as a researcher examined this phenomenon from the point of view of someone who was an outsider, observing this result of preschool choice, who sought to understand the process and the desired outcomes.

A case study methodology (Stake, 2006) guided the data collection and analysis in order to uncover how these mothers view both the purpose of and the barriers in access to pre-

kindergarten's settings for their children in Georgia as well as their perceptions of preschool

quality and school readiness.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

This study was guided by research questions that were intended to produce data to

understand these phenomena as mentioned above. The study's research questions were as

follows:

1. How do Black middle-class mothers of children enrolled in private preschool settings navigate the preschool education market in Georgia?

2. How do Black middle-class mothers of children enrolled in private preschool settings perceive preschool quality and school readiness during their preschool search?

This chapter discusses the rationale for using qualitative research methods and face-to-face

interview procedures as well as the justification for the research design of interviewing as the

main source of data collection in this qualitative inquiry. Procedures for data collection,

participant recruitment, and data analysis are also covered. Lastly, the validity and credibility of

the empirical study are discussed.

Design of the Study

Qualitative research can be focused on the lived experiences of participants through

spoken or written accounts and documents that speak to what they perceive in the world around

them (Patton, 2015). Qualitative case studies focus on the process, meanings, and understandings

of a particular phenomenon, resulting in products that glean rich descriptions in the data

(Merriam, 1998). According to Merriam (1998), case studies serve as an appropriate type of

qualitative research methodology when the researcher is interested in learning about the process

of the phenomenon in the study. Merriam (1998) defines this process as the ability to describe

the context and population of the study, the extent to which the phenomenon under investigation

is implemented and discovering how specific characteristics of the phenomenon as well as context characteristics may have interacted to produce certain outcomes.

According to Stake (1995) a case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances. Stake goes on to emphasize that a case can be any of a multitude of things, but the case must be clearly defined, and the parameters of the case must be delineated. Miles and Huberman (1994) defined a case as "a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context" (p.25.) The unit of analysis in case study research is the bounded phenomenon or entity about which the researcher is interested in gaining knowledge. Stake (1995) further emphasized that case study research is not sampling research and the main focus should be to maximize what the researcher can learn. Here, this case study will focus on the process of private preschool choice among Black middle class mothers in Georgia based on how they construct and understand their knowledge of preschool choice, quality, and school readiness.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) list eight characteristics of qualitative research. Qualitative research first must occur in the natural setting where the participants experience the issue or problem of the study whereas the researcher spends a prolonged period of time having face-to-face interactions. In this case study, interviews with the mothers were held at a public place based on their level of comfort. Second, qualitative research involves the researcher as the key instrument where they are responsible for collecting the relevant data and interpreting it. The current study involved me as the sole source of data collection and analysis which will occur concurrently. Next, qualitative research must involve multiple sources of data. The data collected was from interview transcripts of the participants and documents that reflected the advertising, marketing, admissions, educational, and recruiting efforts of the respective private

preschools that the mothers chose for their children. Fourth, qualitative research involves inductive and deductive data analysis. In this study I used the data to identify patterns and themes of what the participants said and experienced as well as how the private preschools represented themselves. This was done by also deductively presenting the data based on what I perceived was affecting the phenomenon of private preschool choice.

Fifth, qualitative research involves participant meanings. Therefore, as the researcher I approached the task of answering the "what?" and "how?" of the phenomenon of private preschool choice and how the mothers participate in the meaning-making of their private pre-kindergarten enrollment (Patton, 2015). Sixth, the research process for qualitative researchers is emergent. This study involved the openness for modifications to the study, allowing the flexibility of changing interview questions and delving deeper into the phenomenon as the research collected data in the field. Seventh, qualitative research involves the researcher's need to understand how their personal background, culture, and identities may shape their biases and therefore the direction of the study. With this in mind, it was important for me to consider my identity and past experiences in the education field and how that may have affected my interactions with the participants. And finally, qualitative research involves presenting a holistic account of the problem or issue under study. For the current study, I have presented multiple accounts of mothers' decision-making processes based on their school selection and how it related to the mothers' identity of being both Black and middle class, as highlighted in Chapter Four.

Case Study Design

As the first objective of a case study is to understand the case, the multiple cases to be studied must be similar because they can serve as a medium to bring many functions and

relationships together (Stake, 2006). The case that was studied was not the private preschools alone nor is it the curriculum that the schools employ. Instead, this case study was bound by the factors that contributed to the mothers' process for deciding to enroll their child in their respective private preschools.

Stake (1995) identifies three types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. This study will be a collective case study where the researcher compared the data from multiple cases and constructed an understanding of an in-depth, comprehensive process (Stake, 2006). The collective case study approach was appropriate because it involved "important coordination between the individual [case] studies" (Stake, 1995, p. 3-4). The process of private preschool choice and the implications of race and socioeconomic status as experienced by Black middle class mothers along with their perceptions of school readiness were compared based on the preschools the mothers choose for their children.

Therefore, I have defined the case as the process undertaken by those Black middle class mothers who have enrolled their child in any one of the private preschools in metropolitan Atlanta. Because I wanted to understand the implications for private preschool enrollment, this collective case study could also have been considered a comparative case study where the findings of the case with Black mothers who chose among a variety of private pre-kindergarten settings in Atlanta, Georgia were naturally compared for analysis (Stake, 1995).

Stake (1995) warned that collective case studies are not often generalizable because it "may be designed with more concern for representation but, again, the representation of a small sample is difficult to defend" (p.5). Instead, Stake (1995) asserted that balance and variety in case studies selection are critical as the opportunity to learn and understand the case is of primary

importance. Therefore, the delineating of the case by the mothers' respective preschool selection satisfied the diversity of choice among the mothers for the cases of study.

Data Sources

The purpose of the study was to understand the specific perceptions related to the factors and influences of those Black mothers who enrolled their children in private pre-kindergarten settings. In this section, I will discuss details about participant selection, site selection, and participant recruitment.

Participant Selection

Qualitative research tends to have small sample sizes depending on the type of study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As "particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to [my] questions and goals…," I utilized purposive selection for participation in this study (Maxwell, 2013, p.97). According to Simons' definition (2009), purposive sampling is appropriate for this study because it allowed the researcher to "choose people to interview who have a key role in the case and events to observe from which [I am] likely to learn most about the issue in question" (p.34). Though the sample selection for this study was not considered a generalizable sample of the greater population of middle class Black mothers in metro Atlanta, Black middle class mothers who chose a private preschool in metro Atlanta, Georgia were the target demographic. Participants for this study matched specific criteria as follows: 1. Identified as a being born as a Black female, single or married; 2. A middle-income resident of metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia; and 3. Must have had a Black child enrolled in a private pre-kindergarten classroom in metro Atlanta, Georgia during the subsequent, current, or the previous school year. Interview data was collected between May and September 2019. The total participants consenting to participate in this study

were also closely relative amount of the twelve total African American mothers who participated in previous studies of race and Black mothers (Edwards & Few-Demo, 2016; Suizzo, Robinson, & Pahlke, 2008). This study's target participant population of ten total mothers provided for a more manageable collective case study where a diversity of perceptions can be studied (Stake, 1995).

Site Selection

The location of the researcher was important to the study, so recruitment of the sample included private preschool locations in metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia. Atlanta is the capital and the largest city in Georgia. As mentioned above, Atlanta was chosen for the study because of its historical challenge to segregation and school choice and its significant Black population. Data collection did not occur in the private preschool settings where the children of the mothers are enrolled. However, for the convenience of the mothers, data collection occurred in a public location conducive to the school and work schedules of the participants. Interviews were conducted based on the convenience of the parents. In all, interviews occurred in either a coffee shop, local public library, a large shopping mall, a restaurant place of work, the private preschool, or the mother's place of residence. Overall, the interviews took place in different parts of metro Atlanta, including Mableton, Lithonia, Brookhaven, Chamblee, Buckhead, Lawrenceville, and West End.

<div align="center">

Data Collection

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Participant Recruitment

Access to parent participants was gained through the use of multiple gatekeepers. Creswell and Creswell (2018) regard gatekeepers as those individuals at the research site who provide access to the site and allow or permit the research to be done. Initially, access was

pursued by emailing at random the directors and/or owners of private preschool facilities in

metro Atlanta, Georgia through a Google search. In this study, the private preschool

directors/owners served as the gatekeepers for access to the targeted parents. Because one parent

was familiar with three other parents who have also enrolled their child in private preschool

settings, this study also relied significantly on snowball sampling (Patton, 2015). Snowball

sampling was appropriate for this study because additional participants were recruited from the

social networks of mothers who already participated in data collection interview, which allowed

the selection and data collection to expand.

Selection also involved filtering out participants who did not match the participant

criteria as described above. Note that going forward in this study, participants will be referred to

as parents. The initial intent of the target demographic was to include mothers exclusively.

However, one mother invited her child's father to the interview because of his active

involvement in the preschool selection for their child and I, as a researcher, did not want to

exclude his voice in the study. At the conclusion of data collection, including purposeful and

snowball sampling, the parent sample included eleven mothers and one father. Each mother was

interviewed once, and the father was interviewed congruently with the mother of his son but did

not participate in the stimulus activity. Therefore, a total of eleven interviews were conducted

with the twelve parents (n=12) who were recruited. Overall, the respective parents had their

children enrolled in a total of nine different private preschools in metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia.

Interviews

Interviews are very common in qualitative research and particularly common with case

studies. Stake (1995) considered interviews to be the main road to multiple realities as each

interviewee is expected to have had unique experiences and special stories to tell. This study

employed individual reflective semi-structured interviews with the respective participants

(Roulston, 2010). After selecting participants from respective private preschools and scheduling

the interviews, the interviews were transcribed after each individual interview session as the

interview transcripts served as the primary sources of data for the study. Accordingly, all

interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and immediately analyzed (Merriam, 1998).

Charmaz (2006) reminds us that:

> Qualitative interviewing provides an open-ended, in-depth exploration of an
> aspect of life about which the interviewee has substantial experience, often
> combined with considerable insight. The interview can elicit views of this
> person's subjective world. Interviewers sketch the outline of these views by
> delineating the topics and drafting the questions. Interviewing is a flexible,
> emergent technique; ideas and issues emerge during the interview and
> interviewers can immediately pursue these leads (p. 28).

With that in mind, it was important to glean as much of the best possible responses during the

respective sessions because critical perceptions about the process of preschool choice were

expected be shared with me as the researcher. During interview data collection the researcher

engaged with the interviewee and maintained a mindfulness of researcher subjectivities and the

theoretical perspectives of race- and class-based dynamics embedded in society. The researcher

was also mindful of the tasks of interviewing, as well as interview design, analysis, and data

presentation (Roulston, 2010). The interviews for the study lasted 60-112 minutes each and

included follow-up contact with the participants as a way to engage in member checking, which

further affirmed the results of the data analysis. All participants were presented with printed copy

of the participant consent form and gave informed consent to proceed with the audio-recorded

interview. I followed an interview protocol and maintained and protected the identities of the

participants in the transcripts by using pseudonyms to replace the identity of the parents, the

children, the schools the child attended, and any other identifying information.

Also, included in the interview protocol was a stimulus material activity. The stimulus material was designed to be two separate interactive portions of the interview. The mothers were asked to internalize their priorities in their childcare decision-making and order those priorities using preschool quality stimulus cards and again using school readiness stimulus cards. The stimulus activity that was conducted during in the middle of the interview and was two-fold: 1. Parents were presented fifteen index cards with aspects of preschool quality printed on each and were asked to order the cards in order from 1 (most important) to 15 (least important) (APPENDIX F). 2. Parents were presented with seven cards with aspects of school readiness printed on each and were asked to order the school readiness cards in order from 1 (most important) to 7 (least important) (APPENDIX F). To maintain the open-ended nature of the interview, parents were also presented with blank index cards to write-in any aspects of preschool quality and/or school readiness to supplement the pre-printed index cards that was not already printed on the cards. At the conclusion of the interview, each mother was given an autographed copy of the researcher's children's book, *Dance, David, Dance!* (Parker, 2016). The purpose of the activity was to expand and extend the thought process of these mothers, but in a visual/interactive form where their priorities were both self-constructed and presented before them.

The preschool quality indicators were adapted from the study conducted by Forry, Shimkin, Wheeler, and Bock (2013). The fifteen total preschool quality indicators: Cost & Convenience, Provision of Activities, Provider's Credentials/Qualifications, Health & Safety, Childcare Provider's, Teacher-Child Interactions, Family-Child Care Provider Relationship, Structured Learning Opportunities, Classroom Structure & Environment, Promoting Academic

Skills in Children, Use of Curriculum, Arts & Creativity, Provider's Disposition, Availability, Racial Diversity, Bilingual Learning Opportunities. Racial Diversity was included by the author because as Black parents enrolling their children in private preschools often means an increase in socioeconomic and racial diversity, I wanted to know how racial heterogeneous settings were valued in the search.

The school readiness indicators were adapted by the conceptualization of school readiness factors as listed by Graue (1993), Winsler, Tran, Hartman, Madigan, Manfra, and Bleiker (2008), and Magnuson and Waldfogel (2005). For purpose of this study, I used Graue's (1993) constructivist view of child development for school readiness whereas the foundation of school readiness is grounded on the interaction between the individual and the environment. Generally, measures of school readiness encompass language, cognition, fine motor skills, socio-emotional and behavioral concerns (Winsler, Tran, Hartman, Madigan, Manfra, & Bleiker, 2008), as well as test scores (Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005). However, Graue's (1993) indicators apply to the current study because "…school readiness encompasses many aspects of development in addition to academic skills, including health, social skills, positive and problem behaviors, and motivation to learn (Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005, p.188). Furthermore, it is "a socially constructed set of ideas or meanings used to shape the first formal school experiences of children and their families" (Graue, 1993, p.5). Positive Racial Identity was included because of the emphasis Black mothers make in socializing their children for school (Edwards & Few-Demo, 2013). The seven total adapted school readiness cards included: Math Skills, Reading Skills, Gross & Fine Motor Skills, Language Development, Social & Emotional Development, Physical Well-being, and Positive Racial Identity.

Document Analysis

This study used document analysis as way to edify the interview transcription data provided from the individual semi-structured interviews. Bowen (2009) considers document analysis as a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents where the researcher "is expected to demonstrate objectivity (seeking to represent the research material fairly) and sensitivity (responding to even subtle cues to meaning) in the selection and analysis of data from documents" (p.32). The data was examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Private preschools, and particularly faith-based preschools, typically separate themselves from publicly-funded preschool through specific values and curriculum models so that prospective parents can identify and engage with the school's interests. Those documents that reflected the private preschool's values and the underpinnings of the preschool's curriculum were the focus of the present study. According to Bowen (2009), the analytic procedure for analyzing documents involves finding, selecting, appraising, and synthesizing data from the documents. The documents from the private preschools that were under examination included but were necessarily limited to the following: marketing and recruitment materials, history, mission and vision statements, enrollment data, and website homepages. Any other sources of information that reflected the school's approaches to learning and their education philosophy were examined as well.

According to Simons (2009), document analysis can provide "clues to understanding the culture of organizations, the values underlying policies, and the beliefs and attitudes of the writer" (p.63). The iterative process of analysis involves skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation" and "combines elements of content analysis and thematic analysis" (Bowen, 2009, p.32). First, relevant text was identified in the data while

pertinent information was distinguished from irrelevant information, representing the content

analysis. Next, a more focused rereading of the data took place where the researcher performed

coding and category construction in order to discern the themes that characterized the

phenomenon. This was important because the codes used in the interview transcripts were

applied to the content in the documents (Bowen, 2009).

This method of document analysis applied to the current study because the examination

of the private preschools' documents and the way they represented themselves and their school's

culture in print would be reflected those curriculum models and school readiness characteristics

that perhaps would have appealed to the middle class demographic of parents who may have

sought to enroll their childing in private ECE settings. Furthermore, the addition of a document

analysis method of data collection also separates this case study from an interview study.

Data Analysis

A constructivist grounded theory analysis of the interviews involved the process of

coding the transcripts in three phase: initial coding, focused coding, and then categorical themes

(Charmaz, 2006). The purpose was to identify the emergent themes that speak to the process and

navigation of the early education market and the ways race and class were involved in their child

care decision-making and their perceptions of preschool quality and school readiness. Initial

coding was the initial stage of coding. Beginning with line-by-line open coding of data, I

assigned names, or codes, to the statements and sentiments of the parents that were verbally

expressed in the transcript. Here, I sought to specifically identify the overarching premise that

would be most relevant to issues around race and class in preschool choice based on the study's

research questions. Also, I looked for instances where the parents discussed aspects of quality in

early childhood education settings as well as aspects of school readiness, as it relates to the

research questions. From there, the process proceeded to focused coding where the search for commonalities among the initial codes were grouped into focused codes or subthemes of what the parents illustrated. Focused coding is the process of conceptualizing the empirical substance of the phenomenon under study so more concrete themes can be identified. Codes were conceptualized into categories until the codes theoretically saturated the core category and the related categories identified from the transcripts (Holton, 2007). This also involved, at times, in vivo codes where the researcher captured the research participants words and actions as quotes during the interview.

Constant comparative methods were employed throughout the process to further inform the emerging theories that solidify the final step of theoretical sampling until theoretical saturation is reached (Charmaz, 2006). To compare the generated codes of the interview data, I collapsed weak or inapplicable themes and ensure that more consistent and stronger themes became clear and consistently evident within the categories comprised of the relevant codes. This entire process served to paint a picture of how I as a researcher constructed the meaning that the interviewees experienced as they navigated the childcare market in metro Atlanta, Georgia.

The data analysis from the documents involved the iterative process of the following: skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpreting (Bowen, 2009). Bowen (2009) combines both a content analysis and thematic analysis where the former is a process of organizing information into categories as it relates to the research questions and the latter involves a more in-depth reading and the formation of codes followed by category construction. Parents often used the internet and social media to conduct their search for local childcare. In this study, the respective private preschools' websites served as the source of documents for analysis. All nine private preschools' websites were examined for specific

information for analysis. Document analysis was performed on those schools' webpages that

served as marketing brochures, recruitment information, the history of the school, descriptions of

core values, mission and vision statements, and indicators of an early education curriculum

model.

Memos

Memo writing is a continual process that helps to raise the data to a conceptual level and

develop the properties of each category during and after the researcher is in the field. Memos

also guided the next steps in further data collection, coding, and analysis. It is

> "the pivotal intermediate step in grounded theory between data collection and
> writing drafts of papers. When grounded theorists write memos, they stop and
> analyze their ideas about their codes and emerging categories in whatever way
> that occurs to them...Memo-writing is a crucial method in grounded theory
> because it prompts researchers to analyze their data and to develop their codes
> into categories early in the research process. Writing successive memos keeps
> researchers involved in the analysis and helps them to increase the level of
> abstraction of their ideas" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 188).

Memos represented the theoretical notes about the data and the conceptual connections between

categories that were created by the researcher throughout the data collection process. The process

occurred concurrently with the coding and analysis process in order to capture the researcher's

emergent ideation of substantive and theoretical codes and categories that contributed to the

theory that emerged from the study.

Validity & Trustworthiness

The rigor, validity, and trustworthiness of this study was established through the use of

memos, rich field notes, and triangulation. The researcher's own written accounts of the

conceptualizations of the data were represented in written memos (Patton, 2002). This also

included notes for codes and emergent themes in the data. Field notes included detailed

descriptions of the mothers, their child and their child's school, as well as details of the researcher-participant interactions.

Triangulation in this study involved multiple research methods, credibility and member checking. Triangulation of data sources was an effort to see if what the researcher was observing and reporting carried the same meaning when found under different circumstances (Stake, 1995). For example, when researchers want to use a research method that triangulates their research data and provides a way to supplement their reports using printed and electronic text, document analysis is often employed (Bowen, 2009). The use of document analysis served as a triangulated research method because it supplemented the face-to-face interviews by aligning the participants responses with the printed values of the private preschool, which added to the reliability of their responses (Diefenbach, 2009). Specifically, data source triangulation happened when the researcher looked to see if the phenomenon or case remained the same at other times, in other spaces, or as persons interacted differently. Therefore, I looked for negative cases in the data where themes did not occur under other varying circumstances of private preschool decision-making.

Triangulation also involved credibility. Credibility focused on the connection between the claims made in the study, the process of connecting the codes to the theory that were embedded in the study, and the empirical soundness of data and analysis. Credibility was utilized by triangulating the data from the interviews and documents by conducting member-checking. Member checking happened after the data collection and will serve as a second interview where I, as the researcher, electronically asked the interviewees to review the raw data transcripts for accuracy and palatability (Stake, 1995). The purpose of this form of feedback was to check if there is any alternative language or interpretation the interviewee would like to

include for the sake of clarification. Parents were emailed a copy of their interview transcript and instructed to clarify any portion of the transcript that may have be taken out of context or may need further explanation. None of the study participants responded with any changes or clarifications they wanted to make. Member checking also included the accurate alignment of the mothers' views of school readiness with the documents the private preschools used to advertise and market themselves. The credibility of the study was also established through comparing the current study's findings with the findings of published research studies, and the delineating of any empirically contextual harmony or discord among them (Edwards & Few-Demo, 2016; Patton, 2002).

CHAPTER IV
PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?" "Yes, go," she answered. So the girl went and got the baby's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him. When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water." – Exodus 2:7-10

This chapter will give a general synopsis of the study's participants, their interview and stimulus card responses, as well as the incorporation to a lesser extent of the analysis of relevant documents. The central focus of the data analysis was the interview data. A dozen Black middle-income parents shared their attitudes and perceptions of how they navigated the early childhood education market in Atlanta and how those perceptions correlate to their views on preschool quality and school readiness. This method is important because "…by interviewing a number of participants, we can connect their experiences and check the comments of one participant against those of others" (Seidman, 2013, p.27). Included in the interview data, is the inclusion of the stimulus analysis where parents prioritized their values around preschool quality and school readiness during an activity. Interview data was then compared and contrasted with information included in documents that describe the mission, values, culture etc. of the private preschools that the parents chose. Juxtaposing the parents' responses with the private preschools' historical, marketing, and curriculum model documents provided a reflective portrait of alternative early childhood education settings. Therefore, this chapter's data analysis included a presentation of the findings represented as detailed depictions and specific insights of the bounded case. Chapter Five, the concluding chapter, discusses the findings of the study in the context of its implications.

Participant Profile Overview

After purposeful and snowball sampling, a total of twelve participants agreed to an interview. Of the twelve parents, eleven were mothers and there was one father. The father in the study accompanied the mother of his son and participated in her interview but agreed to not participate in the stimulus activity. The twelve parents in this study represent a multitude of life experiences, career professions, respective states of origin, institutions of higher education, and income levels. Table 4.1 provides further parent demographic information. Pseudonyms were used in place of the real names of the parents, their children, and the preschools the children attended. The gender of the children is delineated by color: blue for a boy in preschool and pink for a girl in preschool. There are several aspects of preschool choice relevant to its decision making. The starting age of private enrollment may lend insights to how long parents are afforded parental leave and how they may explore the ECE market prior to private enrollment for their child. Educational attainment is strongly correlated to higher income. Private preschool's tuition rates vary, and their location may often be an inconvenient distance from a family's residence but may be more conducive to work schedules and traffic patterns. As it relates to paternal involvement, ten out of the eleven mothers said their child's father participated in attending childcare tours and would actively engage with staff and make inquiries. Still, all mothers in this study said they asserted their childcare decision-making as the autonomous executive. The mothers all said they knew they had the absolute final say in where their child would be enrolled, unenrolled, and re-enrolled at any given early education setting, as needed, regardless of paternal input. Remember, Georgia Pre-K is free, irrespective of household income.

Table 4.1 *Participant Profile Chart*

Parent's Name, Age	Child's Name, Age	Occupation	Education	Annual Household Income	Child's age at start of preschool	Marital Status	(Pre)school/Highest Grade Level
Ms. Lizzie, 30	Genesis, 4	School Administrator	Bachelor's Degree	$50k-74,999k	8 mos.	Divorced	Northgate Preschool/(K)
Ms. Alicia, 42* ---- w/Mr. Sanders, 67	Shane, 5	Public Health Analyst ---- *Retired IT Professional*	High School Diploma ---- *M.B.A. Degree*	$75k-100k	4 yrs.	Prefer Not to Say	Northgate Preschool/(K)
Ms. Ramona, 36*	Laila, 4	Project Manager	Bachelor's Degree	$200k+	3 mos.	Married	Northgate Preschool/(K)
Ms. Erica, 29	Martin, 4	Teacher	Master's Degree	$25k-49,999	1 yr.	Single	Forest Hills Academy/(6th grade) (fb)
Ms. Michelle, 34*	Danielle, 5	Professor	Doctoral Degree	$100k-129,999	3.5 yrs.	Married	Piedmont Hollow Preschool/(Pre-k)
Ms. Ruby, 49*	Anita, 5	Administrator	Doctoral Degree	$200k+	4 yrs.	Married	Trinity Creek Academy/(12th grade) (fb)
Ms. Beyoncé, 39	Blue, 6	Higher Education Professional	Master's Degree (2)	$50k-$74,999	1.5 yrs.	Single	Exodus Day School/(6th grade) (fb)
Ms. Megan, 37*	Matthew, 4	PhD Student	Master's Degree	Less than $25k	9 mos.	Divorced	Milk and Honey Preschool/(Pre-k) (fb) (half-day)
Ms. Alexis, 35*	Blane, 4	Psychologist	Master's Degree	$75k-100k	2 yrs.	Married	East Atlanta Child Care/(Pre-k)
Ms. Brittany, 37*	Leo, 5	Attorney	Juris Doctorate Degree	$125k-149,999	1 yr.	Married	Henry Christian Day School/(12th grade) (fb)
Ms. Kendra, 37*	Chloe, 4	Sr. Account Manager	Master's Degree	$100k-129,999	3 yrs.	Married	St. Thomas Preschool/(Pre-k) (fb)

*Parent has additional children via birth or blended family or both; fb = faith-based

Private Preschool Overview

Private preschools in this study represented an array of curriculums (e.g. Abeka, Pinnacle®, and Montessori) and extracurricular activities. Central to culture were values of diversity and inclusion, developmentally appropriate activities, as well as an incorporation of reading and literacy throughout STEM-focused (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) projects and the arts.

Coding, ballet, cooking opportunities, and some field trips are the highlights of some of the exposure that students can have, often for an additional charge along with after-school care. Preschools implement a focus on social-emotional development through play-based, child-centered pedagogy. Many focused on holistic growth like character building, healthy hygiene habits, and a respect for nature. Some faith-based settings, like the traditional settings, also focused on some form of community service and awareness. However, that applied more to the schools who had classrooms that were P6 to P12. All of the private preschools positioned themselves as a superior academic alternative to public settings and other private settings in their emphasis on lifelong academic success and civic engagement, technology usage, and school/college/career readiness. Table 4.2 highlights data from counties within the metropolitan Atlanta area where the selected preschools are located. Note, Georgia's population was 10,617,423; median income was $55,679; 60.5% of the population was White; and 32.4% percent of the population was Black.

Table 4.2 *Metropolitan Atlanta Census Demographic Data, 2019*

Preschool	County	County Population	County Median Income	Percent of Population White/Black
Northgate Preschool	Fulton	1,063,937	$64,787	45.6%/44.5%
Forest Hills Academy	Dekalb	759,297	59,280	35.8/54.9

Piedmont Hollow Preschool	Fulton	1,063,937	64,787	45.6/44.5
Trinity Creek Academy	Gwinnett	936,250	67,769	54.5/29.3
Exodus Day School	Fulton	1,063,937	$64,787	45.6/44.5
Milk and Honey Preschool	Gwinnett	936,250	67,769	54.5/29.3
East Atlanta Child Care	Dekalb	759,297	59,280	35.8/54.9
St. Thomas Preschool	Dekalb	759,297	59,280	35.8/54.9
Henry Christian Day School	Henry	234,561	68,609	46.9/46.6

Note. U.S. Census, 2019

Micro-Level Themes

Before discussing the macro level theme that will be discussed in the next chapter, this section provides rich descriptions used to characterize the four micro-level themes that emerged from the data. These verbatim excerpts and specific accounts give a platform to the themes below and represent the analysis of the participant's responses. The micro-level themes serve as responses to the research questions of this qualitative case study: 1) How do Black middle-class mothers of children enrolled in private preschool settings navigate the preschool education market in Georgia? and 2) How do Black middle-class mothers of children enrolled in private preschool settings conceptualize their priorities around indicators of preschool quality and school readiness during their preschool search? These themes are depicted on a micro level because of the small scale or incremental process the parents undertake in their decision-making. The micro-level themes differ from the macro level theme in that macro level theme depicts the larger scale, overarching objective that undergirds parents' decision-making.

After analyzing the data from the parent interviews, the following micro-level themes emerged: (a) Parents Recognize the Race/Class-based Inequities in U.S. Education, (b)

Parents Portrayed a Dissatisfaction for Publicly Funded Early Education Settings, (c)

Parents Use their Social Networks to Secure Transactional Accountability, and (d)

Parents Value an Early Educational Advantage to Level the Playing Field and Produce

Independent/Educated Adults.

Each theme begins with an in vivo, or verbatim, passage to capture the essence of the

theme and to provide a direct thematic synopsis from the participant responses. These opening

direct quotes served three objectives: 1) to center its relevance to the results of data analysis

process 2) to give context throughout its respective theme and 3) to help connect one theme to

the next. Patton (2015) encourages qualitative researchers to exercise empathetic neutrality or

"understanding a person's situation and perspective without judging the person – and

communicating that understanding with authenticity to build rapport, trust, and openness" (p.57).

Key to empathetic neutrality while interviewing is mindfulness or being completely focused on

the interaction with the person being interviewed (Patton, 2015). The characterizing quotes that

open each theme were identified from the interviews while I, as a researcher, exercised

empathetic neutrality with the current study's participants.

THEME ONE: Parents Recognize the Race & Class-based Inequities in U.S. Education

*"Because of that, I'm like, "You know what? My kid will go to that school with those White kids
and they will...even if I had to pay for it. And we can't really afford it, that's another thing. Like
we may have the money, but the money can go towards something else. We're currently in debt
right now because of paying all that money to that school."*

-Ms. Michelle, 34

 "I went to school. Half of my education was in an all-Black environment, then the Civil Rights
Movement came, and I went through integration in the South. And I went to an integrated
school.…I felt like, and I feel like looking back there, I came from an environment where I was a
prince of the city until I was a third-class citizen. And the education made me angry."

-Mr. Sanders, 67

Race became a dominant implication in how these parents approached education decision-making for their children. Their sentiments reflected the different ways in which the education system historically harbors racism towards Black children. Note, this dissertation study originally set out to interview only Black mothers specifically. However, Ms. Alicia was interested in participating in the study and invited Mr. Sanders, Shane's father, because of his familiarity with local schools as a native of Atlanta, Georgia. Ms. Alicia only moved to Atlanta not long before Shane was born so when their son was born, Mr. Sanders took the lead in suggesting appropriate child care settings in the Atlanta metro area. Both Mr. Sanders and Ms. Alicia, however, have respectively experienced racism growing up and it has affected their school choice decisions for their child. As a researcher who conducted this study of Black mothers, I have intentionally decided to highlight the words of the study's sole father and the eldest participant, Mr. Sanders, to open the first theme because of his direct experiences of racism and classism in education as result of living through the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in his adolescence. As with all of the other parents, Mr. Sanders' words above are very direct and unwavering about how he felt about White teachers' impact on himself and Black children growing up. Ms. Ramona, another Atlanta native, believes that the same thing happening in schools today:

> I'll say that in certain settings or in certain areas because as you know, Atlanta and the Metro Atlanta area is still very segregated. There's not, you know, but if I look at it, my nephew just graduated high school. But even looking at his school and for them not to have enough books for the students or if you had, you know...(pauses, while thinking)...The resources are not equal.

The parents recognized that education and its resources are consistent indicators of how the system of education in the United States is used to impose class-based inferiority over Black communities. Ms. Ramona, who opted for a home-based family childcare setting before private

preschool for her daughter, reflected on these glaring inequities, specifically in providing enough

books for students to use in high school for her nephew in Dekalb County, for example.

As Ms. Ramona highlighted how students in present-day Atlanta lack books for learning,

eight parents in this study had emphasized racism in the context of the importance of the

classroom teacher's disposition towards Black children. From a young age, Ms. Erica for

example, the study's youngest participant and a middle school science teacher, recalled a

conversation about her own teacher's predetermined expectations for her class:

> Well, in kindergarten I remember my teacher told us that, we were asking
> questions about, 'What happens after kindergarten and all that?' And I remember
> she told us, 'Some of you would go to college but not all of you,' and it was a
> Caucasian lady at the time. And I was like, 'Why not all of us?' And I remember
> asking her that question and she said, 'Well, just keep living, you'll see.'

Ms. Erica also grew up attending predominantly Black public schools in metro Atlanta and said

she often experienced seeing and hearing her middle and high school teachers telling students

that their life trajectory will peak at being "the garbage man or a janitor." Schools in the US

activate its oppressive nature in different ways, but none are as impactful as the way teachers

speak to and treat their young students. Negative teacher-student interactions and dispositions

can have adverse consequences on students' desire to learn and their motivation for academic

success. This is important because preschool students' school readiness skills increase when a

preschool teacher engages with them using emotional warmth and positive expressions in their

teacher-child interactions (Hatfield, Burchinal, Pianta, & Sideris, 2016). Furthermore, these

parents were very keen to point out the amount of influence a teacher has on a Black child and

how they feel racism undergirds the teachers' negative perceptions of Black students. The

teacher's role is also important to consider because the way the teacher values their students is

evident in both the teacher's language and treatment toward the student. And the parents in this

study recognized how that directly impacts their children's learning. The parents in this study placed preschool teachers in a critical role because of the teacher's ability to assert power in the classroom. Through means of at least dialogue and/or discipline, the parents in this study felt that teachers can exert their race-based biases toward Black students by setting low academic expectations for their learning through excluding them from actively engaging in the lesson or exerting harsher punishment for discipline compared to White students.

Ms. Alexis, another metro-Atlanta native who, along with her husband, decided to secure a nanny until her son was old enough to enroll in an esteemed Black-owned private preschool on the east side of Atlanta, lamented her own teachers' low expectations for Black children growing up:

> So, one – race. I mean, just from my personal experience, I just feel once again [it's] the underbelly. And it's, sometimes it's unintentional, but it's just the, "I don't see you," the lack of expectation which triggers you to not get called on in class, for you not to be expected to perform as well academically, for you to overly perform in sports.

Participants reflect on their own experiences and applied them to how they want their preschool-aged child to experience education. Because of race, Black children may not experience a healthy relationship with the (pre)schools they attended, especially as it relates to (pre)school discipline (Brown & Steele, 2015; Cyphert, 2015; Wesley & Ellis, 2017). For example, Ms. Beyoncé, who has her daughter enrolled in a private faith-based school setting, also believed that teachers come to the classroom already predicting how to engage with Black students' behavior:

> I feel like teachers innately look at the color of our children's skin and in some ways unconsciously determine how that student is going to learn, whether it's a Black teacher to White kids, whether it's a White teacher to Black kids… So we have teachers who ideally would like to think is unbiased in their teachings, in their engagement with students, but if they have a child that is bad or is challenging, it changes the dynamics of how that teacher engaged that child.

Ms. Alicia and Mr. Sanders wanted better-engaging experiences for their son. In an example of parents' willingness to choose and re-choose preschools, they took him out of a faith-based preschool operated by a Black church on the west side of Atlanta and placed him in a predominantly White environment at the prestigious, Bellevue School, on the south side. Ms. Kendra and Ms. Erica have done the same thing with Black-owned settings. They all said that they were not satisfied with the level of instruction and interactions they were experiencing from the teachers and staff. They also felt that the center did not fully meet their expectations in terms of the level of organization, professionalism, and customer service they were used to receiving. Again, Mr. Sanders and Ms. Alicia were not happy with their son's teacher's inability to engage with him as a four-year old while he was enrolled at Bellevue. Mr. Sanders felt history was repeating itself in the context of Bellevue's discipline policy imposed on his young Black son and its similarity to other racist practices in the US, wrought with the long-term negative effects on Black children into adulthood:

> And the kid is an exceptionally bright kid, so quick, but he is rambunctious. So here comes the discipline of the White establishment on the kid: 'Stop, when I say stop. Stand when I stand, stay standing' and to use their word, 'three strikes and you're out.' This is Bellevue's words...And to me that's like criminal justice system.

These parents, in choosing early education settings, certainly start with the end in mind. And they know where they do not want their children to end up. They valued the classroom teacher temperament towards Black children as a meaningful implication to how it affects their child's future. When considering the racism embedded in discipline behaviors in the US that Black children face and its connection to the school-to-prison pipeline, these parents are concerned for the future of their children's subsequent relationship with schools and their child's future quality of life.

Classism was also a concern for these parents and how they approached preschool choice. They were keen to articulate the effects of capitalism in an inequitable society and how that correlated to inequities in education. Ms. Megan, before moving back to Georgia, chose a preschool affiliated with her midwestern university for her first child because a close classmate in her doctoral program and her family operate the facility. Ms. Megan said she knew the preschool had great ratings from the state, was publicly funded, and accepted funding from their university for graduate student childcare. She also recognized that the university affiliation to the early education center had a positive influence on available resources and quality of care. She felt that income was a strong determining factor in access to quality education settings:

> If you think about it, we have a lot of paradigms when it comes to wealth versus poor…beliefs when it comes to what it means to have, be of means, right? And what it means to not. And so, money, when people say like "cash is king", you mean, no, "money is king," right? Because if I'm able to buy certain things or do certain things, that must be they come from a good family- must mean I do all these things, that there's a lot of like moral, um, can't think of the word I'm looking for. Like attributing moral character to money. So, the reverse is true. Not necessarily saying people are immoral, but you know. So, I think when it comes to having money in the way the of education…The educational system is not an altruistic system. I think that people believe it is, but it's not because America in itself is not an altruistic society. So, to think that magically it will be because we're just in this particular aspect of you know, citizenship, like, it's not gonna happen.

Parents recognized the intentionality of the class system in education access in metro Atlanta. Inequities sometimes would simply reflect inconsistent quality instruction from a teacher. Ms. Beyoncé, for example, felt that indicators of class would also determine how a teacher would engage with a child:

> I also think economics play a role. So, if I walked in and I had, you know, labels, and a nice diamond ring, maybe like a Kim Kardashian, they probably would treat my child slightly different and make sure, and again, it depends on who the teacher is in the environment. That teacher might let my child slide and not learn as much and not push my child. Or that teacher might be like, 'This is my, you know, a way into this society's world, so I'm gonna push this child.' Or it could be a teacher who

is just like, 'I'm bitter, I'm mad the child got everything, so I'm gonna just be mean and push them.' You just never know.

Ms. Beyoncé recalled how her own mother was doing her best to "beat the system" and circumvent poor schools districts to enroll her in one of the oldest all-female private school in Louisiana. She attributes school choice to a game that has rules, players, and strategies for a successful outcome. Income and class, however, represent an uneven playing field where Black students are not afforded the same opportunities to education as their White counterparts. Therefore, parents in this study generally felt that income served as either an obstacle or an opportunity to accessing quality preschool settings, depending on how much income a household had. In education, that can be a glaring implication to inequity. Ms. Ruby said it this way:

> I think that race and ethnicity is historically and systemically related, often to opportunity and privilege and therefore to socioeconomic background and opportunity, which in my opinion directly correlates often, in terms of as a general swath, not in terms of individuals. Of course, individuals can do and always there can be outliers in any situation, but generally to academic opportunities, not in academic ability, not academic success, but academic opportunity.

Ms. Megan, earlier, doubts the US will ever see itself as a truly equitable, altruistic society. Above, Ms. Ruby, an Ivy League graduate, synthesized the moving parts that scaffold the inequities that exist in their world. These realities are learned and internalized with key influences in parents' childcare search.

Parents in the study also recognized that a connection between income and residential choice and how access to quality preschool is often tied to location (Bassok et al., 2016; Wright, 2011). A family's ability to afford the cost to live in the area would then glean the convenience of access to that neighborhood's preschool centers. Because new parents overwhelming chose childcare close to home, low-income parents would not be able to access quality childcare due to location and distance. Parents in this study felt that these race-related circumstances of inequity

are historical and intentional. For example, Ms. Kendra remembered seeing parents' expensive

automobiles and luxury sports cars in the parking lot of St. Thomas Preschool in Dekalb County.

According to her observation, that distinction was how she can "tell it's more middle to upper

class people" who have children enrolled at her daughter's faith-based preschool. She said she

and her husband recently moved away from Decatur in metro Atlanta and moved further away

from the city but still within the county due to the lack of affordability of the rising cost of living

caused by gentrification. In addition, she is keen to notice that the cost of living in Decatur

marginalizes low-income Black people from ever living comfortably in that city:

> Those people paying like $4,000 a year in taxes for their house, to live over there.
> That's a lot. And then when you, like the grocery bags - you have to buy the trash
> bags from the grocery store. You can't…you just go buy your own trash bags.
> You gotta buy trash bags that say 'City of Decatur' on it. They got small,
> medium, large ones and they will not pick up your trash if it's not in that bag. So
> they taxed you [in] so many different ways to be able to fund the school system.

She continued:

> It's tough, you know, it's tough to have these conversations, you know. But I tried,
> it's like when we were looking at high school or middle School, we moved to the
> City of Decatur. City of Decatur is expensive. We did that for three years. But
> when we found that we were pregnant with Layla, it was like, 'Uh, we can't do
> that.' So, we stayed until she was 18 months, and it was really cramped. And then
> we were like, 'We gotta buy, we can't buy over here. It's too expensive, too
> expensive.' So, um...But they do a good job of keeping us out too, over there.

When asked if the color of someone's skin can dictate the kind of education one gets in the US,

all parents affirmed that belief. Ms. Michelle, an English professor from Virginia who also

previously enrolled her child in a faith-based childcare setting, responded by also acknowledging

the compounding role that income can play on young Black students learning to navigate their

academic matriculation. The lack of resources and support she experienced has compelled her to

change that life course for her children because she said she does not want them to struggle. In

her personal account of espousing class status to its relationship with access to quality education, she mentioned her aspirations for her daughters:

> I was down in [city redacted] Virginia with my dad at the time and we moved from place to place. So I feel like being, when you're Black, you have a…There are issues. The socioeconomic piece - I'm moving from place of place, school to school. I failed a grade because of that. I was held back in the third grade because of that. Resources, not having enough support at home because your parent is trying to work. They're working, working, working, trying to put food on the table. So yeah, I remember struggling. And maybe that is the reason why I wanted my kids to have a better education, whether it's paid or not. I'm just like (heavy sigh) I don't want them to struggle like I did. Because in the very beginning, that set the foundation for the rest of my school. I struggled after that - through high school, grad [school]. It just seemed like it was a struggle. Everything came harder because I - when you're younger, that's a lot. You need to get everything when you're younger and if you don't, you will struggle along the way.

In addition to naming and identifying the nature of the education system in the US, the parents in this study, like Ms. Michelle above, activated their child advocacy to give their children a chance to an upward navigation through their schooling, even knowing that it is unlikely that their child will avoid racism and classism altogether in their lifetime. Here we see the snowball effect of adversities that Black students face. They are often exposed to income-based hindrances to their ability to succeed in the classroom compounded by the racist predispositions that await them in the US public school system. Preschool choice for Black middle-class families therefore are particularly complex because Moore (2008) suggests:

> In the class system of stratification, the middle-class strata represent a higher status group; while in the racial system of identification, blackness represents a lower status category. Such incongruence situates middle-class blacks in a functional position to explore the relationship between the two systems of stratification (p.495).

Race and class together affect Black parent's preschool decision-making in that they must leverage their past experiences of racism with their current income status for their children to avoid exposure to problems from an early age that White students may never face.

THEME TWO: Parents Portrayed a Dissatisfaction for Publicly Funded Early Education Settings

"I don't want my son in public school to start. I knew that when I was pregnant with him. Because of my past with public school, because of what I see with a lot of young men with public school, he needs more of a one-on-one. Especially since my child is fatherless, I always felt he needed the extra hands on him. That's why I moved back home. He doesn't need to be influenced by students who (pause)… I don't know their backgrounds. And I'm not trying to judge anyone here, but I wanted his influences to all be one of the same main levels."

<div align="right">-Ms. Erica, 29</div>

The next theme transitions the focus of the results away from broad education perspectives to specific perspectives around publicly funded education. Theme Two is a conceptualization of the parents' observations inside and outside of the public funded early education settings – that is, what they see both on the premises and what they see in the parents who send their children there. Similar to Theme One, the reasons why the Black parents in Theme Two are dissatisfied with public preschool settings is because of their longstanding beliefs that because of racism coupled with classism in the post-*Brown* era, Black families have not consistently experienced well-resourced, welcoming environments in the schools in their local communities. As Theme One focused on parents' perceptions of inequalities in residential segregation, lack of resources, and particularly teacher influences in the classroom, those parents in this study who considered settings that accepted public funding felt unattracted to the publicly funded early childhood education facilities, including Georgia Pre-K.

Only one parent, Ms. Ramona, had her child enrolled in a family childcare center prior to private preschool enrollment. She was very satisfied with the level of engagement and overall experience the teachers gave her daughter, Laila. Five parents toured childcare centers who accepted state-subsidized childcare funding in the form of a preschool scholarship, through the CAPS Program (Child and Parent Services) in hopes of supporting a local, oftentimes Black-

owned childcare facility. CAPS funding is specifically targeted for low-income families in Georgia to help pay for childcare and is operated by DECAL (Bright from the Start Department of Early Care and Learning). For example, Ms. Megan mentioned that she noticed Georgia Pre-K is marketed towards low-income families not because of the advertising itself, but because of where she sees the advertisements (e.g. public transportation and social service offices). She knows that Georgia Pre-K is universal, but it has an intended target. She said, "It's supposed to be for everybody but, (laugher) but I'm going to say it's more so for lower income families." Not all preschools in Georgia, however, are required to accept CAPS scholarship funding. Regardless, the parents in this study who toured publicly funded childcare settings were dissatisfied with facilities that accept public and state funding, including Georgia Pre-K, because they felt its intended demographic signaled the predisposition for inferior quality and disingenuous classroom experiences for their children.

In addition, Theme Two emphasized parents' negative views of the quality in the environment seen at the specific childcare settings who accepted CAPS funding. These parents' tour experiences illustrated what makes it difficult to navigate the turbulent waters of the early education marketplace. Based on prior knowledge and experiences in public education and as a result of their childcare tour experiences, Black parents in this study viewed the inequitable access to quality preschool in Georgia to be both perpetual and intentional. Parents feel that problems of access are ongoing and specifically marginalize access to quality preschool based on income, race, and subsequently location, as will be discussed in Theme Three.

Going deeper, the Black parents in this study valued their perspectives of publicly funded childcares based on their convictions of what they wanted their children to avoid, as illustrated in Theme One. During the data analysis of the parents' tour experiences, I reflected on the words of

the late poet and Presidential Medal of Freedom awardee Maya Angelou: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Similar to the low-income Black parents of preschool children in Forry et al.'s (2013) study, Theme Two was drawn considerably from recognizing how the Black mothers in this study had a distinctive self-awareness of the ways in which a prospective childcare setting made them "feel," a recurring (in vivo) term in describing their tour observations. After these tours, none of these parents forgot what they had heard and seen and, as it relates to this study, how that may affect their child. In general, the Black parents were dissatisfied with the publicly funded early education environments' overall inadequacy of professionalism and resources, as well as the stereotypes associated with its overall landscape.

Ms. Erica's opening statement above reflects the intentional early education decisions made on behalf of a child, even prenatal. Similarly, Ms. Ruby said she knew as well, even telling her now-husband while they were dating that she had every intention of enrolling their future children, Anita (4) and Maria (9), into private schools. Ms. Ruby, however, was in private schools her entire life growing up and wants the same for her children, who attend Trinity Creek Academy in Gwinnett County. Conversely, Ms. Erica, who wears her hair in natural locks and also maintains a positive racial identity, had experienced public schools and the pain that it often caused her was something she was trying to prevent happening to her son:

> And I'm about culture and I really feel we can be the change we want to see in our culture. And this is a hidden voice of the culture that needs to be heard…But I have so much insecurities behind public school, so much of that 'Knock 50' pain. I don't want that repeated. I want to break generational curses here.

This study showed how previous experiences in public education in the United States has caused "pain" for many Black students, a pain that lingers into adulthood and future child advocacy decision-making (Cooper, 2007).

Teachers often impose such oppressive emotions in different ways. It can be done through setting low expectations for Black academic achievement or subconsciously treating Black students like inferior objects who lack the cognitive aptitude to successfully matriculate a prescribed public school curriculum. Leading up to her high school experiences, Ms. Erica said her public school teachers, in their deficit-thinking towards Black students, have subconsciously taught her to understand that only 50% of the students in her school will graduate and go on to lead successful lives while the other half will not reach the same fate. This ideology has been so well-engrained in her adolescent psyche that she said she came up with a term for it, "Knock 50." Teachers' consistent knocks, or criticisms, toward Black students' behavior and academic abilities have taught her to look around in any room and safely assume that half of the students there will not become constructive members of society as adults. For Ms. Erica, her choosing enrollment into Forest Hills Academy for her son, Martin, therefore, serves as a solution to prevent that internalized pain from transferring to her four-year old son, Martin.

Furthermore, as a researcher, Ms. Erica's "hidden voice of the culture" of favoring private preschool in the Black community sheds light that the objective of these parents' preschool search has at least two purposes. One, it directly edifies the objective of the study as stated in Chapter One and two, it pushes back on dominant narratives that Black parents do not value education or that they lack an awareness for identifying quality education settings for their children. To the "change" she said she wants to see, she referenced the words of Mahatma Ghandi - both an advocate for peace and equality in cultures that have a caste system and a significant proponent of the nonviolent forms of social change heralded by the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement. Since caste societies exist to accumulate power and control for the oppressor, as in India for example, the education made

available for darker-skinned, lower class citizens is often local but would be under-funded and poorly managed, with little emphasis on curriculum or college preparedness. This is important to the current study because students in caste societies who are exposed to these conditions are tracked into, and therefore expected to have a considerably hindered likelihood of upward socioeconomic mobility through adulthood (Pierce, 2017). These parents' dissatisfaction, therefore, served as to affirm their resistance to perceived oppressive childcare settings.

As it relates to the early education marketplace, the parents in this study wanted to avoid the available, public early education settings, sometimes coined as "daycares." For the parents in this study, a daycare is a widely undesirable childcare setting that lacks a curriculum and exists to simply watch over, or babysit, small children during the day. Not all, but most daycares and many family childcare settings typically accept CAPS funding, they retain lower costs for care, and often unfortunately come with commensurate quality. Ms. Lizzie, a Tennessee-native living in the Dunwoody area, described the inadequacies she witnessed during her tours in her residential area:

> The first one I looked at, it just, it felt like a daycare as opposed to an early education center. And for me that's a huge no-no… So, the first thing I saw is the teachers. The childcare providers were dressed like they were going to the gym or like they had just gotten out of bed. The classrooms were so-so, as I kind of did my tour, the lesson plan was nonexistent. There was no lesson plan. It was basically just the children played all day. They napped; they ate. For me, I need my child to be doing something that's developmentally appropriate for him. So that was one school, another school - I just felt like the staff wasn't friendly enough. That's important. Even if you're faking friendliness, I need to know that you at least know how to fake it. And it wasn't there. It wasn't there. So, I actually didn't even finish that tour - the third tour I went to.

Ms. Lizzie, a mother of a child at the private Northgate Preschool, evaluated the daycares along her search based on how they measure against a private early education center. Using comparative language like "as opposed to" and "enough" lead the data to imply the existence of

a predetermined expectation applied by her threshold of quality which was not met during the tours.

These predetermined expectations that guided these mothers' convictions do not exclusively apply to daycare settings. Off-putting experiences of care were also found on a tour of a private preschool center, for example, that is franchised with multiple metro-Atlanta locations. Ms. Michelle, an English professor and former charter school teacher, remembered her tour at a private preschool in Southwest Atlanta:

> It was an African American [-owned/operated] daycare (laughter) and I was not pleased with the unprofessionalism that was displayed there with the talking, not taking care of the babies, babies weren't taken care of. I wanted to support Piedmont Chase Preschool because it was a part of my community. But unfortunately, because of the unprofessionalism, I did not pursue. I went there three times too and I just couldn't.

She expressed her sentiments of dissatisfaction in daycare-style settings when she described a possible setting for her then-toddler daughter, Danielle, as "not pleased," "not taking care," and "did not pursue." As a researcher, the sequence of this language stood out as an account of someone who would avoid enrolling their child at this kind of childcare and would also not recommend a parent to enroll their child into this setting, Piedmont Chase. Ms. Michelle, during our interview in her home, emphasized how she and her husband, an accountant, did not want their children to struggle academically as they advance through school. She had experienced cumbersome absenteeism growing up as a result of frequently relocating with her father after a divorce. As a result, she said she had to repeat a grade level and work twice as hard to attend her HBCU and then later to earn her doctoral degree.

As Ms. Erica, Ms. Lizzie, and Ms. Michelle all mentioned their convictions about teacher interactions as an integral part of their childcare tour experiences, Ms. Brittany names her

feelings outright as the guide toward her discomfort about the children's disposition during a

tour:

> Just to see their reactions and how they were engaged. I don't know. I guess
> maybe my mom instinct was kicking in for the first time in life. But there were a
> couple of tours that I did before we settled on his daycare where the children at
> that baby age where they couldn't talk. A lot of them looked really lethargic or
> something - that just didn't make me comfortable.

To be fair to the setting described above, children at that age may seem lethargic for a

variety of reasons. However, Ms. Brittany was confident that those reasons stem from the

teachers' lack of engagement with the children. Her "mom instinct" served as her

compass for choosing an appropriate setting for her sons, ultimately choosing the private

Henry Christian Day School. In distinct correlations similar to Ms. Megan observations,

Ms. Brittany goes on to add how she became skeptical of the quality that Georgia Pre-K

would provide, and for whom:

> So, for whatever reason, again, probably talking to other moms with
> similar-aged kids, I related the Quality Rated signs, or schools with those
> signs outside of there, with the Georgia Pre-K program. When I toured,
> because I do have a younger son as well who was in daycare, when I
> toured the quality rated schools, I was very turned off. It, for some reason,
> I don't know what it was about those schools. I didn't, I never bothered to
> investigate it. But it was those particular schools, and I'm thinking about
> three or four in particular in my area, that I just didn't want to send my
> kids there.

In the displeasure found in childcare options, the last line of this above account

begs the question: Who would *want* to send their child to the childcare setting described

above? In this theme of dissatisfaction, the question of access to quality and the desire to

pursue such a setting does not revolve around what settings parents would *want* to send

their child to, but rather the kind of settings that parents would *have* to send their child to,

or the level or threshold of quality parents can *afford*. Race and class emphasize the

frustration towards state-funded childcare settings because the Black middle-class parents

in this study recognize that most of the time, parents who *must* unfortunately send their

child to low quality, undesirable settings are also Black, and almost always poor (Bassok

& Galdo, 2016).

As this study sought to understand the influence of race and class on child care

choice in the metro Atlanta early childhood education market, the implications of this

theme showed how the Black parents in this study felt dissatisfied at the negative

correlation of poor quality publicly funded child care to its high availability to parents in

Black communities. And when a service, or in this case early childhood education, is

free, those poor, and therefore vulnerable parents are perceived to have less control and

less of a voice in their calls for better access to quality childcare. Ms. Ruby explained it

this way:

> … I do think that parents who send their children to Georgia Pre-K or to any other
> public experience, have the same goals for their children - absolutely. They want
> their children to be in a safe, creative, you know, structured environment. I think
> though that often their investment in that process might be different. Because they
> haven't, you know, because it, it is something that's being forwarded to them and
> they don't have to invest it.

She pointed out how she perceives free, universal Georgia Pre-K is "forwarded" to parents as an

early education option in which they are not required to "invest." Her statement assumes that

quality is also correlated to a level of a parent's involvement that serves as that investment.

Furthermore, perceptions within the data from this study would also suggest, for those parents

assuming a positive correlation between cost and childcare quality, that when parents lack the

financial investment in quality early childhood education or if those investments involve a

reliance on state-funds, then the correlative "dividend" in quality would be expectedly consistent

with that. Ms. Kendra, for example, experienced public and magnet programs growing up in

coastal South Carolina. She remembers her mother pulling her out of kindergarten after the first

day because, although it was a school in an all-Black downtown neighborhood, it lacked the

intangible investments, like parent involvement, her mother valued. Ms. Kendra ultimately chose

a private, church-affiliated preschool in Dekalb County for her then-toddler, Chloe, but not

before selecting a locally owned daycare:

> I feel like I had issues with schools that has state funding. So, like the Bright from the Start program, particularly the CAPS program. I couldn't do it again because of what I dealt with at her other school. So when I was looking, the first school that I went to, that I told you I did not like, had the CAPS program…And I just feel like, like I told you before, these daycare owners are making a lot of money. They're making a lot of money. I know how much the other daycare owner was making at the other school and I know that she was paying those people minimum wage to do a job to watch our kids. You know, but they're also getting all this money from this state, consistently. If you know anything about Medicaid programs and Medicare programs, that money is like clockwork. That's like someone had chosen to be a landlord during the Section Eight. He knows it's guaranteed money. He doesn't have to worry about that money not being there. You might have to worry about how they do your house, how they take care of your house, but you know it was guaranteed. I think she, she was taking [us] for granted. She's getting all this money every month, consistently. But you're not taking care of the kids. I don't feel like you were taking care of your staff.

A large part of the preschool decision-making these parents faced was avoiding being

"taken for granted" by childcare facility owners. In other words, parents felt that lower income

would make them more susceptible to poor childcare quality but in exchange, however, for the

convenience of its accessibility, as Ms. Ruby alluded earlier to as "forwarded investments." Poor

staff management in the publicly funded sector of Atlanta's childcare market, which children

would potentially endure, is a part of these parents' aversion from public early education

settings, again characterized as daycares. This is not because of the (lower or nonexistent) cost

itself, but instead, according to the parents in this study, because those early education

environments with supplemented or subsidized costs for childcare are perceived to have inferior

childcare resources, teacher pay, safety, and most importantly, overall teacher-child interactions.

Nevertheless, evidence of exposure to quality preschool settings for Black children in the US is

mixed. Even though studies have shown that Black children are more likely to experience lower quality child care compared to White children (Barnett, Carolan, & Johns, 2013; Early et al., 2010), Iruka and Morgan (2014) affirmed that Black children experience settings with a variety of quality levels, with many experiencing settings that have moderately high quality.

In addition to expressing their dissatisfaction in the overall management of these locations while navigating their tours of early childhood education settings, many of study's mothers also avoided these daycares because they were deterred by the temperament of the parents of the children enrolled at the daycare centers. This portion of Theme Two was particularly challenging to express because of the underlying sentiments Black parents in the study had towards some low-income Black parents of young children in these specific locations. Note, the following perceptions are not meant to disparage or ridicule Black parents of low socioeconomic communities. Nor are the following perceptions intended to generalize poverty or to condemn those Black parents who find themselves in poverty. On the contrary, the following comments made by Black parents about Black parents come from a place of empathy and yet, equal concern. The concern stems from Bourdieu's belief there can be ambiguity within classes where the Black middle-class may find themselves in settings where they feel they need to "climb down" as a "symbolic struggle" of defining Black culture (Bourdieu, 1984, p.254). It also reflects concerns for also defining a Black habitus

Consistently in the field of this research, parents would express their apprehension to enrolling their child in settings with signage designating state funding, i.e. CAPS and/or Georgia Pre-K. Parents felt that free and subsidized early education settings intended for low-income communities, coupled with the perceived stereotyped behaviors of the parents who frequent them, automated a perception of the poor quality at those locations and substantiated their

aversion enough to consider childcare settings elsewhere – private preschools. Only a few parents toured those settings while the others were disinterested publicly funded settings altogether. The parents in this study believed the lack of support and resources are rampant in neighborhoods where low-income Black parents were perceived to perpetuate negative stereotypes. These stereotypes, including a disregard for their appearance or their behaviors in public, signaled to the study participants an absent appreciation for learning and education. Therefore, the state-funded childcare settings that the study participants toured, or those settings where parents make a supplemented financial investment or no financial investment at all towards their costs of childcare, were perceived to also not make any intangible investments in their children at home. Furthermore, the perception also extends to believe that childcare settings who receive state subsidies in metro Atlanta incubate minimal parent involvement due to the perceived parents' lack of valuing education whereas those behaviors are inherently (read: honestly) transferred to and imitated by the children who are enrolled there. This is a concern because students' disruptive behaviors in the classroom can serve as a distraction and hinder learning. These parents felt that disrupted learning can lead to poor academic performance and then negative attitudes toward education and academic success throughout adolescence.

However, the study participants, in considering the permanent racism in the US and its inequalities in the education system, also conveyed an empathetic accountability to their avoidance where they still maintained an understanding of day-to-day motherhood and the united resilience found in the pursuit of education for Black communities regardless of socioeconomic status. On the one hand, the internalizing of these visible stereotypes made concurrently with childcare decisions caused both frustration and compassion for the parents in this study. A part of that internalization, for example, reproduced the acceptance of socially constructed behavioral

and cultural norms that are not inclusive of the many ways Black parents value education in their communities. With a reluctant uneasiness, many times during their interview these Black mothers took long pauses, discontinued eye contact, tapped their leg in anxiousness, or stared at random objects in the room while searching for the words to describe both what they see and how they feel about the state of childcare for Black families in Atlanta, during our interviews. As women, compared to men, are more openly expressive with their emotions, descriptions of these stereotypes often caused a visible change in body language, and if not the release of a deep sigh.

On the other hand, Dubois' (1903) double consciousness paradigm indeed persists in childcare decision-making for these study participants. They know that their income grants them access to quality childcare normally afforded to White parents, only while also lamenting the unequal access to quality childcare for members of their own race. During their interviews about how they navigated the waters of the childcare market, these participants did the difficult work of reflecting on their balancing of maintaining a positive racial and parental identity with an overdue historic entitlement to equitable access to quality childcare (among other services), all while recognizing that in light of the former, income would acquire the latter.

Because the study participants recognized the extent to which systemic racism and socioeconomic marginalization have been so historically and intentionally pervasive in Black communities, the parents in this study did not want to put their children at risk of maturing to embody the behaviors, albeit subjective, found in these environments' childcare settings. Community support and involvement in childcare is also important because quality in childcare can vary by neighborhood (Fram & Kim, 2012). For example, although Mr. Sanders, who put his first son in public schools, did not believe that private preschool is a guarantee for a good"

education," he did believe that education varies by neighborhood, just as the effectiveness of the

Georgia Pre-K program varies by zipcode:

> Georgia Pre-K to me, it depends on like what neighborhood you come from. You could be in some of the neighborhoods where it would be as successful academically-speaking…as any private school or better. And then you have some neighborhoods where they don't have the resources and the support - no family type of support and whatnot that others have, I think. So, it runs the whole gamut from left to right.

This study's objective was to understand how race and class influence childcare decision-making

and how their perceptions of that, coupled with their perceptions of preschool quality and school

readiness, influenced those decisions. A parent's racial and class identity may influence that

decision in different ways, often subconsciously.

Inductively, I have resolved to conclude that as the study participants' expressed an

aversion to the unprofessionalism and the parents of daycare centers while concurrently

emphasizing their support for Black communities and the positive influence of those

communities to Atlanta that also embedded in Theme Two is the avoidance of stereotype threat

during the search for childcare. Stereotype threat in this study is characterized as moments where

the mothers wanted to avoid their children's exposure and then potentially conforming to

negative stereotypes in the Black community. Stereotype threat is important because it was one

of the stark deterrences to publicly funded childcare enrollment in this study. The mothers of this

study knew that stereotype threat in an educational context can open the door for implicit biases

towards their child later in life – therefore, preventing them from opportunities from social

advancement (Aronson, 2004; Wasserberg, 2014). Ms. Kendra, for example, recognized that

mothers often sustain long, nontraditional hours for work. She also recognized that Black

communities with daycares who accept state subsidies often operate in areas with visibly deviant

behavior and illicit activity. With both support and empathy for the Black community, Ms.

Kendra also drew some parameters around the conditions she wanted to her child to absorb:

> But you try your best, you know, it's like "pull somebody up by the bootstraps" type of deal, you know, go back into the community and make the community better. So, then you try to do that. But then you also have to look out for your kid's best interests and your own best interests. And if you have people coming up in there...Like that principal in Texas, everybody was mad 'cause she implemented a dress code…Because the parents come in looking any kind of way. But when you see that, you don't want your kids around that foolishness. You don't want your kids to be friends with that mom. When you see that mom that never cares about her appearance and looks a certain way every day. I don't know why she looks that way. She may have worked all night and she might be tired. I don't know. But I know if you're cursing in the parking lot and you boyfriend's dropping the kids off and smelling like weed and stuff like that, I don't want my child around that.

Again, in valuing Black communities, the parents in this study showed how they understand

what it is like to make ends meet for a household and to genuinely sacrifice, even one's own

appearance, to work long and often untraditional hours so that the children may benefit. Ms.

Kendra approached her search by saying she wants to both "pull up" the interests of Black

people and "look out for" the interests she has for her and her child.

> Ms. Ruby, similar to Ms. Erica's comments to begin the theme about "levels," also

wanted to control for certain experiences for her children:

> I'm having dinner with my mother. I was telling her, I said, 'You know, one of the things that I struggle with is that there's so much around class here, and I know it.'…Part of it is curating, and this is gonna sound bad, but it's curating - that's just it. When I talk about curating the experience of my children, it's curating the experience in terms of the other children that will be in the room with them.

She and many other parents felt that the value of education is harbored by how parents present

and carry themselves, especially when they are visiting their child's school, as it sets an example

for young, impressionable children. Above, Ms. Kendra referenced a policy implemented by a

Texas high school principal, a Black woman, where parents were mandated to adhere to a

specific dress code when coming to the school, which has a student body of 98% Latinx and

Black students. The dress code, met with significant online and community backlash, prevented

parents from visiting the school wearing pajamas, shower caps, sagging pants, and low-cut tank

tops, among others (Marvosh, 2019). Ms. Kendra felt that quality childcare would not be found

in areas where parents consistently presented themselves this way in public.

Meanwhile, Ms. Alexis had only considered private preschools in her search and was

very content with her son, Blane, enrolled at the private, Black-owned and operated East Atlanta

Child Care, where her husband also attended as a child. While growing up, she said she felt she

always had to work harder than the White students in her class in order to be successful. She is a

mental health therapist with her own practice and her own nonprofit, where she mentors middle

and high school-aged Black girls and supports their career and professional development. During

her preschool search, she said she never bothered to conduct a tour of a publicly funded facility.

However, while she admitted to her lack of knowledge of the Georgia Pre-K program, she also

described the stereotype threat found in the visual landscape she was simultaneously avoiding for

her children: "I don't really know anything about it. I do know that when I pass by parking lots, I

see people come in there with bonnets and furry flip flops and that's not a place I'd want to be."

She continues to describe how that correlates to what that means to her values around the

community:

> Well, one just on a very basic level and this is just honesty. This is transparency.
> So [in] the event to present yourself in a manner to which, I don't want to say
> 'socially acceptable,' but for your culture, for yourself, who you are, to take the
> time to put the care into yourself or the effort. Because the time is usually there.
> The effort, you know, it, just for me, it reflects laziness.

Parents wanted to enroll their children in childcare settings where other parents and the

community visibly took pride in it. And they wanted the pride in the childcare setting took look

and feel a certain way. But the connection between the lack of care in one's appearance to a perceived laziness reflects a deviation from the dominant and "socially acceptable" behaviors of those who value their educational self-identity. It also reflects internalized stereotypes towards environments of oppressed communities who disregard the subjective "acceptable culture" young children need to see. These perceived stereotypes are at risk of being transferred into the preschool classroom. There is an unspoken assumption, therefore, that these daycare parents' temperaments translate to a lack of involvement in their children's academic experiences. After asking, she further explained what she would expect in the classroom:

> Inside of the classroom - I need your child to be behaviorally appropriate, not perfect - age appropriate, so education can take place. Because what's happening in the schools now is there is a [concern for] behavior management; you can be a behavior specialist...

For the parents in this study, like Ms. Alexis above, who did not consider enrolling their child in state-subsidized settings, forewent doing so because the settings did not pass the "eye test." The parents in this study who did indeed have their child previously enrolled in a daycare setting lament the poor quality of care and the facilities they and their child experienced. Ms. Erica, who along with Ms. Kendra had her child temporarily enrolled in a daycare, eventually changed childcare settings twice before choosing Forest Hills Academy and noted an improved quality with the increase in price from the one setting the next. At the first childcare setting, Ms. Erica recalls securing care at a cost of $60 per week out of necessity before finding a church-based setting with better quality and a higher weekly cost:

> I honestly was looking for something I could afford. I just moved out of the house. Well after my parent's house, I'm living on my own and I'm paying all these bills for the first time. So, I found a daycare and it was only $60 a week and I was like, "Oh, this is great! I can afford this." However, I was very uncomfortable with the setting. And some things that took place, dealing with my son, having diaper rash and, just felt like, you know, people neglecting my child there. So, I pulled him out for a month while I was looking for other places, and

> then I finally found a place that's only a mile from my parents' home. That's a
> little bit more expensive, about $30 more, but the care there in the facility was so
> much better. So, it took me about a month or two to find the right place.

Ms. Erica also had "uncomfortable" experiences at the first childcare setting she could afford

while living independently. This discomfort towards certain settings was also shared by Ms.

Michelle. She said she did not register her daughter for Georgia Pre-K until her husband

resigned from his job, thinking that her family income would then fall below an income

threshold needed to qualify for a Georgia Pre-K slot. She also said that although the mother who

told her about Georgia Pre-K could not afford private pre-kindergarten herself, by the time Ms.

Michelle finally got a call to fill the slot, she did not take it because of private enrollment. And

by that time, she did not want to discontinue her child's enrollment at Piedmont Hollow

Preschool. Ms. Michelle said she exercised patience in waiting for a Georgia Pre-K slot to open

for her child. Since her husband found a new job, they again had the money for private preschool

as dual income household again. But by now she had to go back to work, so she also chose a

private preschool because the time remaining on her maternity leave was running out. She said,

> But the wait list was very long. They had a very long waiting list. And you
> weren't promised to get a call back. So, by the time it was time for me to go to
> work, I hadn't received a call, she had to go somewhere. I did find a program
> around the corner with Georgia Pre-K at an African American place in Austell.
> It's owned by an African American woman. But once again, I think the main, the
> same thing - the vibe. I didn't trust her academy enough, it seemed like she lacks
> teachers, I just didn't feel comfortable.

The sentiments of discomfort continued with Ms. Brittany who persisted to support Black-owned

childcare centers by going on additional tours in her local Henry County. While on a different

tour of a daycare with her infant son, Leo, she recalled the facilities were not clean and seeing

one young teacher texting in the classroom and ignoring the children. She was concerned about

that because it reflected the level of attention the children were not receiving at such a young

age:

> And so I saw, you know, kids at that age, they hit, they bit, they do a lot of things that they don't really have control over. And I saw some of that going on and the Quality Rated daycare - just kids crawling on the top of each other, scratching, pulling and nobody, you know, their attention wasn't on it. And so I'm like, 'For these kids to be so young and they can't verbalize their needs, you need to either have a smaller class or more teachers in there.' I mean it was...I wouldn't have been able to control that many children moving around and begging and crying and screaming. So, I did not like that about how those centers.

Back when Ms. Kendra took a chance on a day care setting for her child, she remembered doing

so against her intuitions. She felt satisfied with the experience only because she considered her

child's teacher to be the most nurturing among the other teachers at the daycare. However, once

when her child's teacher no longer worked there, she decided it was a time for a change. Instead

of allowing a different teacher at the daycare to watch her child she decided instead to leave and

continue her early education search again:

> Morale is low. You have a couple of teachers that care. But like I said, when she left, I'm like, 'I'm out.' I just consistently saw it go by the wayside. So, when I went to this new center and I'm like, I'm looking around, you know, and then I, and I thought to myself, 'I don't…,' I guess I was angry. I was angry because I really, really, really, really wanted to support a Black-owned business. And I did and got screwed before. And went solely I think for the purpose of, cause I knew this is a Black-owned business, and I was trying to support. And I was just like, 'Why?'

Ms. Brittany's childcare search has allowed her to come to a particular realization about what it

must mean to be a low-income, Black parent as a consumer in the early childhood education

marketplace:

> (heavy sigh) Yeah. And I, I hate to say that, like I said, I'm not here to insult anybody and judge and I'm, I'm sure there's programs in other locations that are run a lot better than that. I think sometimes again, like I said, it starts off as a great, a great idea. But based on resources, lack of what they're paying these daycare teachers, um, lack of requirements, um, you know…And I think you just, sometimes you just get what you get.

In her realization, she correlates the economics of childcare with a system of inputs and outputs. Parents in this study have concerns for inputs like teacher pay as an indicator of teacher morale and subsequently, their children's experiences serving as the outputs. This is similar to Ms. Ruby's perception of a childcare setting being "forwarded" but lacking the parental financial investments. Those financial investments, serving the inputs, would go towards teacher pay and therefore can improve the climate of the childcare environment and in turn improve and increase the nurturing teacher-child interactions.

Again, the parents in this study are not intentionally avoiding members of their own race, but rather the perceived stereotypes of their race. The double consciousness identity becomes more overt as Ms. Kendra sympathized the paradox of the behavioral results of systematic oppression's effect on low-income Black communities balanced with the desire to sustain her identity of accountability to that very same community: "That's a large part of the demographic that uses CAPS. And everybody knows that. We know how our people are (laughter), we know. And the Talented 10th is tough being in, you know what I mean?" The parents in this study were dissatisfied with the childcare options available in the Black communities they visited. Based on these parents' previous experiences with public education in the US, their skeptical perceptions of quality were often affirmed.

THEME THREE: Parents Use Social Networks to Secure "Transactional Accountability"

Honestly, at the end of the day it's a business and they, they are indebted to their customers in a different way than public schools are. You know, public schools are definitely accountable to the community, but it's a different type of accountability whereas it's a little bit more transactional accountability. And even as a scholarship parent, I think that you would reap the benefits of that transactional relationship and expectations that can then be put on the organization school as a result of that.

- Ms. Ruby, 49

As these mothers hope to conduct an exchange of sorts for their transactional accountability, I was compelled to conceptualize this exchange to include the inputs and outputs that parents desire in preschools. But first I asked of the data, how did these parents come to conduct this transaction, and for what, in this transaction, are they holding the private preschools accountable? When parents weigh what they have socially constructed from their previous education experiences coupled with their dissuasion for federal and state funded childcare settings, how did they come to decide on private preschool for their children? Parents in this study were overall convinced that when they pay more, they get more. And they certainly believe that it also applies to the early childhood education marketplace. So, what is it about these private preschools that lead these parents to believe that these are quality settings, ready to prepare their child for elementary school?

Theme Three uncovers the values that these parents assign to the premium they pay to serve as the investment towards accessing quality preschool experiences for their children in metro Atlanta. In exchange for the tuition they are willing to pay, they hold an expectation for the preschool to provide certain intangible investments, particularly in the school's culture and environment. These parents in this study want schools to provide a nurturing, welcoming atmosphere where the school will sustain a reciprocal relationship with parents and families that guides their involvement toward a holistic, play-based approach to their children's love for

learning to prepare them for kindergarten and life. However, based on the stimulus activity, the parents in this study also significantly valued language development which implies that parents want play to be the medium for delivering academic indicators. This was evident because every parent in this study had their child enrolled in a private preschool that used a curriculum that emphasized child-centered approaches and socioemotional development, while often incorporating the arts and encouraging creativity. In addition, all of the private preschools in this study had a focus on STEM or technology in general, and sometimes coding, as was the case for Northgate and Forest Hills. Included in that pursuit of a successful transaction is the evaluation of who the prospective private preschool both attracts and produces – its parents and students. In other words, as the parents in this study considered consulting other peers and parents within their social networks in pursuit of private settings, they also made distinctions about the type of parents they consulted coupled with the disposition of their children as it correlated to the effectiveness of the climate of the preschool under consideration. The distinctions these prospective parents would often make relied heavily on the behaviors and habits that they would observe during social interactions. This is relevant because Bourdieu (1984) asserts that social reproduction for families is often measured among other families of middle-income status by the performance of language and body language that reflects speech patterns of dominant classes of upward social mobility. In its absence, middle class parents often disregard the validity of lower-income parent's opinions due to the perception of nondominant class dispositions.

Earlier, Theme One emphasized the parents' observed negative effects of race and class on education in the US. Theme Two focused on the dissatisfaction and the propensity to avoid the unprofessionalism of the staff and the parents of the daycare settings that the parents toured. Theme Three now shifts the focus to the pursuit of the private preschool alternatives available in

Atlanta, in light of what their money and other forms of capital can buy for their child. The main

focus of this theme is transactional accountability. I will begin with defining that in the context

of the objective of the parents' search. Next, I will focus on some of the dynamics around how

these parents search for private preschools. Last, I will discuss the accountability upheld by the

private preschools that the parents feel they and their children received in exchange.

In the quote to open this theme, Ms. Ruby approaches the early education search at least

as an education marketplace, complete with supply, demand, and competition. In her relegation

of the economics of preschool choice, she adopts a pragmatic approach to maximizing value and

realizing dividends to such an investment. For these parents, reaping the benefits of private

school curriculum also assumes a certain level of control in the form of reciprocity whereas the

disenrollment stemming from unmet expectations served as recourse in exchange for paying for

enrollment. Her comments of a "transaction" come in the context of a recommendation to a

possible low-income or scholarship parent who could leverage their socioeconomic identity to

take advantage of a worthwhile opportunity to access this environment. This strategy of

transactional accountability is enacted under the assumption that a parent would not otherwise be

able to access this well-resourced environment in an otherwise publicly funded preschool setting.

Generally speaking, some parents in the US hold the assumption that private schools are better

options to public schools. Mr. Sanders reflected:

> And I think also for myself, I didn't know much about the private schools because
> my other sons, my oldest son, my grandsons went to public school. And I think
> that most of Ms. Alicia's boys, older than Shane, also went to public school. So,
> the private schools to us was a mystery that was supposed to be, 'if you get into a
> private school, it's guaranteed good education, quality education, upwardly
> mobile,' that kind of thing.

As we will see in Theme Four, when parents in this study pursue private preschools for their

children they start with the end in mind – "upwardly mobile." In addition to race, this study

focused on the effects that a class identity may have on childcare decision making. Ms. Lizzie felt the same way about access to quality early education, "Usually if you're going to have high quality preschool and pre-k, you're going to pay the price for it." The sentiments of these parents reflect access to quality preschool based on income, a perceived necessary component to this transaction.

Higher income also comes with distinctions that signal socially accepted symbols or institutions to embody quality education. For example, Mr. Sanders and Ms. Alicia enrolled their son, Shane, in the prestigious and affluent Bellevue School on the southside of Atlanta before taking him out and enrolling him in Northgate Preschool located close to the top of the Perimeter (Highway I-285) on the north side of Atlanta. In another example, when asked about her views on quality education in Atlanta, Ms. Kendra gave two prominent Atlanta private schools by name: Paideia School and Bellevue School. When I asked her why those two specific schools immediately came to mind, she responded:

> People wouldn't consistently put kids in there and pay that kind of money. So, money has a lot to do with the connection with the money too, I think. When you say, 'high quality,' I just think money then I think about, "Okay." And my first thought was, 'Oh, all these celebrities got their kids in Bellevue, so, okay.'

Ms. Kendra believes that not only does quality early education come at a price, but quality preschool education also has a paper trail. She feels that families with money are connected to other networks with money and that specific correlation is visibly represented in private schools in Atlanta. She also implies that wealthy families sustain these private schools as a way to further incubate opportunities for their children to also obtain comparable class status as adults, and in turn fulfill cultural reproduction (Nash, 1990).

Consequently, these parents realize that some form of financial investment into these schools is necessary for accessing these resources and opportunities, also coined by the parents

as privilege. Ms. Michelle, however, agrees but not without her reservations about the extent to which privilege correlates to resources. At first, when asked about the key difference between Georgia Pre-K and private pre-k, she bemoaned, "Unfortunately, with private pre-k's you have resources. Those resources, whether it's from sponsors, the owner, there's a privilege there. There's a privilege with who these kids are exposed...Maybe I'm wrong, I could be wrong. I could be wrong." Ms. Michelle said that she previously felt that way when her daughter was enrolled in private pre-k and she was not employed while writing her dissertation and nine months pregnant. When she began teaching at a charter school after graduation, however, her experiences lead her to socially construct a reevaluation of the existence of privilege and its connection, instead, to human capital:

> I'm not convinced that it even matters because it's all in who's at the school. Because like a charter school for lower income kids maybe or middle-class kids, it's all in who's at the school. I have all my degrees. I worked with some very smart teachers and admin[istrators] who are very educated with city smarts and street, you know. So now my mind has kind of changed towards that whole idea of privilege. Cause it's like even at the charter school, to some extent you are privileged based on who the admin brings into the school. Now resource wise, we weren't privileged (laughter). We lacked resources. We're in the middle school building when it's a high school [student body], hovering over top of each other.

Parents in this study want preschools to provide both qualified educators and ample resources to support them. In addition, these parents were also looking for these private schools to provide access to an actively involved environment, in the form of other parents who want the same thing for their children.

Here, the focus of the theme now shifts to the prospective private preschool's ability to deliver a desired school environment that values education. Parents often determined this by evaluating the commonalities parents had with the parents they approached who were affiliated with private preschools. These commonalities were gauged based on their shared values around

education, the expectation of educational success, as well as socioeconomic indicators and racial identity. Ms. Ruby feels many of these factors are critical to this transaction. Ms. Ruby put into her own words exactly what she perceives, often speaking for other parents in this study:

> I feel like, you know, it's kind of like an unspoken relationship between schools and families. The school is saying, 'We know you're paying for something you don't necessarily have to pay this much for.' And the parents are saying, 'You know we're paying for something we don't necessarily have the pay this much for (laughter).' And so I feel like the school feels that it is their responsibility to give a little bit extra. And so, I recognize that they didn't have resources to do so. What I feel like it is, you know, there's also this kind of unspoken piece when you see other parents, like 'We know we're paying for something. I know what we're doing, we're making this decision and that we're making it based on certain values. And there's an assumption that you all are making it based on those same values.' It's almost like I'm entering into a contract, even with other parents, that my kid's going to act right and is going to contribute to this environment. And you're paying so that your kid can contribute to this environment. And so, I feel like we're all here for a curated experience and because we are putting some - we got some skin in the game that we all recognize, yes.

Ms. Ruby, who in Theme Two said she wants to "curate" her preschool choice experience around fellow students, put very simply what many private school parents internalized – "skin in the game." In other words, transactional accountability in preschool choice also involves risk. The viability of this de facto "unspoken" contract lies in ensuring that parents, as active choosers, are vested in the process of their child's development inside and outside of the formal preschool setting.

This agreement is also portrayed as a curated experience. The New Oxford American Dictionary defines the word curate as: "select, organize, and present typically using professional or expert knowledge." When something has been curated, e.g. a catered event or an art exhibit, its allure lies in the premise of both personal choice and control in its presentation. In other words when something has been curated, the final product would reflect the distinctive selections and discriminatory tastes in what would be deemed customizable and appropriate. It is also

important to note that the New Oxford American Dictionary has an alternative definition of the same word: "to select the performers or performances that will feature in (an arts event or program)." In this study, both above definitions of the word curate apply to preschool choice. The parents in this study selected, organized, and presented to either their child's father and/or to themselves the prospective preschool options (sometimes both public and private) and considered the active "performers" (staff, other parents and their children) in the preschool classroom setting.

Most importantly with this curating, however, is the fact that the parents in this study also served as the experts of their own determinations around preschool choices for their children. The objective of securing transactional accountability with a private preschool is found in the preschool choice curation itself. Parents in this study, as their own experts in child care, wanted to control their options to allow their child to have access to environments where, in addition to the preschool staff, the parents, and inherently the children, all value learning and development.

Preschool choice is about options but just as equally, control and autonomy. Ms. Erica, for example, described her initial impressions of her visit to Forest Hills Academy's Open House, a pre-k through sixth grade setting. She also identified her values around her preschool choice curation:

> So, I go in the school, you know, people are greeting me: 'Hello, welcome. Hi. How are you?' And another thing I'm noticing, they're all Black. But let me backtrack: Before I walk in the school, I'm noticing all the vehicle tags, I'm seeing 'UGA,' 'Tuskegee.' I'm saying, 'Okay, so most of the parents here are educated parents as well.' And not that that truly matters, but I really feel my parents did a darn good job for people who haven't went to higher education. But I just don't ever want my son to feel kind of like the oddball. You know, that, 'Oh, I went to my Mom's homecoming.' And they're like, 'What's that?' You know, that's something I would've said at his age. So, I was like, 'Okay, people with some same life experiences. Go in, people are very friendly. I signed my name, write my son's name. They escorted me to where we sit…

Ms. Erica was more than content with her visit and how she was treated at the private school. She said that the positive Black educators, including multiple Black male educators, contributed to why she chose Forest Hills Academy. In her statement above she specifically named the institutions of higher education affiliated with the parents and staff. Then she said she wanted to prevent her son from experiencing social isolation ("oddball") due to a lack of post-secondary exposure among his peers. Instead, she is content with her son being in an educational setting where peer conversations about college experiences would be normalized and familiar for him.

Because the broader concept transactional accountability involves influences from both parents and their children as the future preschool classmates, Theme Three also focuses on how the parents in this study approached their preschool curation using their navigational capital (Mavrogordato & Harris, 2017; Yosso, 2005). Although all of the parents used the internet and social media to some extent to get information about a preschool, all of the parents found their private preschool in a variety of ways. All of the parents valued a preschool's advertising or ratings to be generally insignificant. Diversity in the preschool came up frequently, but parents typically desired a multi-ethnic setting, as opposed to strictly Black or White, for example.

Additionally, nine parents in this study relied heavily on word of mouth within their social networks. The other three found their child's preschool through their own search. Word of mouth in preschool selection, as with any recommendation, relied heavily on credibility in two ways in this study. For one, credibility was often established based on how the advising parent valued education in the Black community, a key aspect of their Black habitus (Lofton & Davis, 2014). Some parents, like Ms. Lizzie and Ms. Michelle, found out about Georgia Pre-K opportunities through word of mouth from other Black parents in their communities. Similar to Ms. Michelle, they both shared that the parents who told them about it, however, also mentioned

that they knew they could not afford private preschool and probably never toured one. Secondly, if a child was present during the conversation, the child's behavior and speech patterns also served to establish credibility of the private preschool and to some extent, parent involvement.

Parents in this study have explicitly acknowledged using word of mouth as a strategy to collect information about preschools. For example, Ms. Beyoncé, who had the most variety of enrollment in private preschool for her child, said she values education as a high priority and that it is a driving factor when she considers who she is listening to about preschools for her daughter, Blue. Ms. Beyoncé enrolled her child in East Atlanta Child Care off of a recommendation from both of her child's pediatricians at the Morehouse School of Medicine when Blue kept getting sick while enrolled at Red Clay Montessori Preschool. In all, the parents in the study valued education and generally sought advice from similar parents in what Ms. Alexis called "other Black professionals" (coworkers, neighbors, and community members), as parents also considered educational attainment during their preschool search. Ms. Beyoncé spoke for seven other parents in this study when she said, "I value opinions of individuals who I feel like they value education the same way that I do." Ms. Lizzie believed that residential location and word of mouth could also glean unbiased opinions:

> But just talking to someone in your local Kroger or Publix and just mentioning that you're looking for early education. 'Oh, well I was thinking about the Northgate of Brookhaven" and they say, 'Oh, that's awesome school. Both of my kids are there, my nephew's there. It's an awesome place.' Or you may have a parent that says, 'You know what? Our kids are there, but it's not that great.' Word of mouth, I think, is the best.

Ms. Ramona's preschool curation was also unique because while she was pregnant, she admitted telling a friend that she had "no clue" what she was going to do about childcare. She eventually enrolled her daughter, Laila, first in a family childcare center and then in Northgate Preschool

based off of recommendations from respective parents with a child enrolled there. First, she told

of her family childcare setting recommendation:

> It did matter. The thing that sold me with the person who I met at this friend's function. Her son was there, and she could show me everything he learned. She could show me how well he was mannered. I saw how he was. And not saying that she didn't do it at home, but I understand as a working mother too, you can teach your children certain things with some of it - you know, they're at daycare a lot. And she was telling me what he was actually learning there. So, it was me seeing that, seeing the interaction.

Both conversations included the indicators that Ms. Ramona valued: parent satisfaction of the

learning and learning environment and the child's social-emotional disposition. She goes on to

describe another convincing conversation she had with the Northgate parent she met at a mutual

friend's birthday dinner in a nearby Mexican restaurant:

> She had a son. He attended Northgate and they lived [close to] the school…But she was talking about his classroom like, she was talking about his classroom and she was just talking about other children there. She said, 'He loves playing.' She loves things he's learning. She was like, 'The staff was really nice,' things like that. So, I was like, 'Okay, cool.' But at the time, like I said, I wasn't even really, I really hadn't started my search, but that just kind of sat in the back of my mind. So, when I decided I was ready, I started scheduling tours. So that was one of the schools that I toured.

Again, all parents relied on their social networks and online information in some way. And for

Ms. Beyoncé and Ms. Ramona, above, finding the right preschool from one's social network can

even happen serendipitously. Parents in this study asked other parents in their social networks,

both vis-à-vis and online, about preschool options. Social networks often include classmates

from institutions of higher education. Ms. Ruby, for example, attended Ivy League schools, but

when she returned to Atlanta, she fielded private preschool recommendations from her

classmates who also grew up in the area before attending college with her. Online social

networks affiliated with undergraduate institutions were particularly useful for three of the

parents who attended the same all-female college together and communicate regularly in the

online mothers' group for graduates of their alma mater. Three mothers from this online

mothers' group reached out to Ms. Brittany and recommended Henry Christian Day School and

she enrolled her son after the first visit, serving also as the only preschool visit in her search:

> Oh, I value everything they're saying, and they say, because to me it's...I mean
> moms, that's already kind of like the sub-cultural, sub-community that I didn't
> know existed prior to becoming a mom…They just have your back basically - like
> they're more invested. Put it that way.

As a researcher, it is important to understand how language is applied to certain social concerns,

like childcare quality and preschool choice. As a mother of two Black boys, Ms. Brittany felt that

motherhood is its own entity within the Black community, and it exists at least to help other

Black mothers advocate for their children's preschool education and their children's future.

So much of a child's future is connected to their early outcomes as the future measure to

which they can contribute to society as independent adults. In a sense, the results of this study

reveal that parents want these private preschools to not only educate, but also socialize their

children for behaviors and temperaments of success and productivity. That is what illustrates the

significance parents place on their underlying focus on a child's behavior whenever the parents

in this study come across them during their search. For six parents in this study, a child's

behavior and speech patterns could signal academic success and/or class status (Dumais, 2006).

It can be socially interpreted into predetermined life trajectories of upward socioeconomic

mobility. As a result, parents felt that private preschools, as opposed to settings with Georgia

Pre-K, would indoctrinate their children for academic and future success both academically and

socially. Ms. Erica edified Theme Three when she evaluated the credibility of fellow teachers'

preschool recommendations to include observations of their children:

> I value their opinion highly, especially, being their coworker. I've met some of
> their children. I've seen the level some of their kids are at, especially their kids
> being three or four years old and my son only being one going on two. I kind of

look almost very, I wouldn't say envious. But I was like, 'I love the level your son speaks on, or the way your daughter approaches me, or how she recognizes things around your classroom.' I want my son to be on that level. So, I did put their opinions at a high value.

Ms. Alexis also felt that low- and middle-income socioeconomic status was an important indicator in her preschool curation by noting which parents had the income and, therefore, control to choose among choice sets of preschools as well as those households who had the time to engage in other laborious acts of motherwork (Collins, 1994; Cooper, 2007):

> Well, basically outcomes. I looked at their fruit, their outcomes. So, sometimes also whether they had choices, or they were forced into these positions. Cause when you have choices you can make clearer decisions. So, it was a very intentional process. People who had flexibility, two parent homes, double income or the ability to have one income and still, um, be okay on one income breastfeeding moms. That's a very different area that are also targeted.

This study highlighted Black parents as a marginalized group in the US education system and how race and class affect their preschool choice decision-making.

Race and class are connected in this process because parents feel that the money spent on private schools serve as a solution to securing better trajectories for their children as future adults. Earlier in this theme, Mr. Sanders stated the overall expectation that private school's bear is their role to improve or sustain a child's future socioeconomic status. Ms. Ruby's comments revealed that she lived through that positive expectation and believed to some degree, that private schools tend to be more accountable in doing so, compared to public schools, based on a difference she observed in the outcomes of her neighbors growing up. When asked how her race has influenced her own educational experiences, she replied:

> Wow. My own race...I think that, and I know, and it's interesting, we had this conversation last night with my mother. But my parents' intentional intervention in my education, in terms of sending me to private school, was critical in terms of my educational opportunities. Because I know people of my same age and background from my neighborhood, who went the public school route of what

was available and the opportunity afforded them - very smart, very capable people - our outcomes have just been different.

Transactional accountability involves expectations and an exchange of resources – Black parents' tuition payments served as access to an environment of resources and opportunities for their child's school/life preparedness. These parents expect that access to these schools meant they are getting something better compared to what is the offered for free in Georgia Pre-K.

In the previous theme, parents described the free and subsidized early education settings with disappointing portrayals. Therefore, transactional accountability towards private preschools also involved their ability to provide adequate assurances that their private preschool culture is more inviting and courteous, and therefore a better environment to cultivate learning and child development. The parents in this study felt that the best environment for their child was the preschool setting whose teachers and staff successfully sustained a nurturing, attentive environment that positively developed the child's self-esteem and social emotional development towards their peers and towards learning. Overall, parents wanted to enroll their child in encouraging and fostering preschool settings that they could take pride in. Ms. Lizzie felt that it should be a part of the quality a preschool would have to offer:

> When you say high quality preschool it is well spoken of - like the community speaks highly of it. Parents who have been at the school previously speak highly of it. When you walk in the school you get an immediate sense of 'Wow, these people really value this score and they value the education of this school and for the children. When you walk in a classroom you can kind of feel the structure in it.

Ms. Erica found her transaction/curation in a center that would give her son the nurturing support that she did not experience in public schools growing up. Ms. Erica was highly impressed with her visit to Forest Hills and their school philosophy around academic success:

> Martin's school - they're going to not tell them 'Only half of you.' They're going to tell you, 'All in here are scholars. You all in here are going to be successful.'

> And I don't ever want him to feel that his fellow brother or sister might not make it, might be that one hanging back. While he can, if he works hard, he can...He doesn't have to put on that, 'Okay, I gotta be better than all of them.' Instead, it's going to be more of a, 'We are all in this together.' And that's something I haven't experienced, and I really want him to.

Ms. Michelle, like many parents, noted and appreciated the racial diversity of Danielle's school, Piedmont Hollow. She also balanced race and class in her description and pointed to the significance of the role the staff play during her visit:

> Well first of all, I could tell by the staff - as soon as you get, as soon as I enter the admin, the directors, I was pretty much familiar with them [because] they reminded me of myself, like with the personality. Also, the parents that I would see, they looked like me. You know, I, they were African American parents, Caucasian, some of everyone. Once again, the diversity was there. These are kids in my socioeconomic standing. So, I wanted Danielle to be familiar with that as well. The atmosphere was nice. The people were friendly, they were attentive, the infant [room], every classroom.

Many of the private preschools provide opportunities in the form of concerted cultivation – enriching, social activities for children and their peers that supplement learning (Lareau, 2011, 2014). Ms. Megan found out about the faith-based Milk and Honey Preschool through a nearby private preschool who was at capacity. She expressed an appreciation for that referral, and in addition to its convenient location, also echoed the importance of the staff:

> But I would say, again, go back to the essence, very caring staff. They are very, very communicative in terms of with parents, and teachers and parents. And I also enjoy the various activities they have for the kids. They have after school programs, enrichments that you can get your child into like computers or ballet. But ultimately, it's the staff - they're amazing.

Ms. Beyoncé also highlighted the role that other parents play in cultivating an early education environment that values education. In her comments, she identified indicators of race and class and how enrollment in East Atlanta Child Care represents the best she can access for her child.

Ms. Megan, a fifth-generation educator, felt that she is carrying on a legacy of access to education for her own children, based on the example set by her father. She recalled growing up living in predominantly White neighborhoods and attending predominantly White schools because her parents felt the schools in the Black neighborhoods of Detroit lacked consistent resources and support. Parents felt transactional accountability is about providing the best support for their child now to increase the likelihood of access to better opportunities in the future. Megan said,

> So, my father is from the projects of Detroit. So, for me he wanted me to have it better. And he's also an educator, so he wanted to make sure that I had a great education and a lot of support.

The curated-focused transactional accountability involves not only education but an environment of support from inside and outside of the home.

Parents in this study chose private preschools that use child-centered or play-based curriculums and they have had overall positive experiences with their children enrolled in them. Theme Three centered around an objective: to secure the best preschool setting for their child using the social networks that are familiar. This theme is important because it showed the extent to which parents positioned their race and class identities and the extent to which they positioned themselves among other parents in pursuit of preschool options in ways that consider their previous experiences of race in education. Parents often employ strategies and intuition to gauge desirable preschools in Atlanta. Lastly, the decision to enroll their child in a private preschool comes with an expectation of an advantage. The next and final theme, Theme Four, focuses more specifically on what they hope their child will gain from their curated enrollment into private preschool.

THEME FOUR: Parents Value an Early Educational Advantage to Level the Playing Field and to Produce Educated/Independent Adults

I guess, when I think of the reading and literacy it's kind of like, you know with him being a Black male they already, Black males already have strikes against them. So, it's like you need to be ahead of the game at all times. You know, we need to be two steps ahead. So, you definitely know how to read and write and all that. So that's why that's important for me.

-Ms. Alicia, 42

The "already" aspect of this statement reflects Moses' mother knew and her sentiments and sense of urgency for him to avoid an inevitable fate. Here, Ms. Alicia recognized how racism in US education settings can particularly impact Black males and how that can impact their trajectory as adults. Ms. Alicia also mentioned how frequently she feels it is necessary to secure an advantage for her children - "at all times." The parents in this study felt that this advantage of access to quality preschool must be activated early and often. In her advocacy to get her son "ahead of the game," she has placed Shane in three different private preschool settings before the age of five, all in search of that advantage for her child.

The parents in this study were overwhelmingly satisfied with the results they were seeing in their child's development from private preschool enrollment. They all felt, in general, that they probably would not be able to see these same results in their child if they had attended Georgia Pre-K. An early advantage is important because these parents believe that advantages in education are historically reserved for White families. Ms. Lizzie said:

> It's extremely important. You want your child to go into kindergarten and be able to recognize letters. Of course, recognize numbers, letters, colors, shapes. I think it's really important (tap on table for emphasis), especially (tap) now (tap). And I'm gonna (tap) go back to with (tap)(tap) Brown children - it's especially important for them to be above the curve.

Equity in access to early education is a concern for these parents who knew their financial status would elevate their chances to access to quality for their children. When I

asked Ms. Kendra about Georgia Pre-K and what she perceived it offered she felt that it would be adequate in preparing her daughter for kindergarten and she still wanted more for her child. In the same vein, parents wanted to exercise their financial status to provide for their children the access to quality over and above what government funding offers – the level of quality that is afforded to higher income White students. Ms. Kendra summarized it this way, "Yeah. It's free.com. It's definitely in my budget. I just felt like I wanted to give her a little edge, if possible." Preschool choice has its uncertainties that vary from setting to setting. That aspect exacerbates the childcare crisis for the Black community. Private preschool enrollment served as a solution to circumvent that concern.

Ms. Alexis considered her household's financial status and social capital as an investment and she expected the accountability of the private preschool to produce a return on that investment: "We're choosing this, this place for an advantage and we're taking advantage of our advantages to that." Her rationale stemmed from how she had socially constructed her own identity and the disparate results from disparate education settings: "As a Black woman. Personal, as well as being witnessed with other people who are highly intelligent, highly brilliant, however, there's a discrepancy in their outcomes versus what happened in their educational experience." Parents in this studied used private early education settings to access the quality that White families have access to and that Black families strived for. With that in mind, the parents in this study used private preschool to level the playing field for their children when considering the advantages of their child's White counterparts. Ms. Ramona expressed:

> The opportunities are there. You just have to know that they're there. And
> sometimes for me, even when making this decision for Laila, it's just me wanting
> to try to prepare her as much as possible so that she has that head start that I see
> that White children have as well.

When I asked her why she felt that the additional resources of private preschool made her child's

experiences better than Georgia Pre-K enrollment, she said:

> I just feel like those additional resources potentially could lead to them earning
> more, can lead to them getting a better job or getting into that private, prestigious,
> not prestigious, but maybe getting a scholarship to college - your world is opened
> up.

The literature on the effects of private school enrollment are mixed. While Pianta and Ansari

(2018) found that private school enrollment does not predict academic success by high school

overall until they considered family income, Berger and Winters (2016) found that private school

enrollment increases earnings for adults, more so for women than men.

The early education advantage is again correlated to White neighborhoods in the words

of Ms. Michelle. After moving to a new neighborhood, she disclosed that she did not necessarily

know much about the preschools in her new residential area. But she connects a White racial

identity to superior access to resources compared to neighborhoods with a predominantly Black

identity. In a previous theme, she acknowledged both the racism she sees in education and her

affinity to support Black-owned preschools, yet she perceives access to quality education as

something historically reserved for White communities and those with the money to access them:

> Of course! Of course. Of course. And that was the main reason why we left out of
> Atlanta. Where we lived in Atlanta in the city that was a...it consisted of African
> Americans. The schools weren't great. It seems like in certain areas the schools
> are not great. We lack resources. Where else? I move where? To an area where
> there's diversity - a little pinch of Whiteness or you know, for some reason it
> makes a difference. So, I think that's another thing. With looking at my mind, I
> was like, "Okay, there are White people here, I know there are resources,
> unfortunately." There are resources and I want my child to take advantage of
> those same resources given to these kids even if I have to pay it.

One of the ways Ms. Michelle and other parents have social constructed school quality and

therefore, one of the reasons she and her husband bought their new home was "for the schools,"

a reference to how many high-status parents "buy schools" (Holme, 2002). Ms. Michelle felt the same way that most of the parents in this study felt – early learning advantages in school can reap sustained academic success through high school and post-secondary settings. Parents felt that this kind of access was income-based, and the value of the private preschool education also provided exposure to supplemental learning experiences for their children. When children have opportunities to be exposed to academically enriching, real world experiences, they felt they are learning in an environment that focuses on their holistic development. The private preschool's ability to provide these enriching activities was a strong indicator of the advantages parents in this study described. Ms. Brittany was also content with her private preschool choice and her doubts to receive the same level of quality from Georgia Pre-K for her son:

> Absolutely do. I definitely saw my son thrive just within a year from going from K3 to K4 and then certainly K4 to K5. Even outside of the things we do as a family, outside of school, his exposure is so much greater. His awareness is so much greater. It's a Christian school, which I'm not super religious myself. But you know, they just teach him those intrinsic values of caring and helping and just being a good person. He's writing, he's doing math. They have a little STEM program in K4, Spanish, all those little different activities. So, I definitely think it was worth it. I don't know that I could have gotten that in a public setting.

In her praise of her private preschool selection, Ms. Brittany also included her admonishment of the school's focus on "intrinsic values." In other words, the ways students apply their social-emotional development directly to their classmates, peers, and school community in hopes of being productive, amenable citizens as adults in society is a connection to the social emotional-focused, child-centered settings parents in this study sought.

Again, the parents in this study socially constructed access to quality early education to income as they felt sometimes neighborhood-based access could glean long-term benefits to the children themselves. That desire for Black parents to access quality education for their children in the US is a longstanding sojourn through segregation, shaped intentionally by race and income

driven barriers. These barriers have in tandem have caused systematically oppressive environments conducive to poverty and crime and their stereotypes. Even though the sample of Black parents in this study chose either racial homogenous or heterogenous private school settings in metro Atlanta, all of the parents wanted their preschool-aged children to have early advantages for upward socioeconomic mobility later in life.

To connect Theme Three to the current theme, Ms. Erica named two quintessential Black pop culture screen gems, with their respective disparate class-based implications on life outcomes, to describe her objectives for her son in her preschool choice search:

> …I definitely spoke on it, that's why I want him here at this predominantly Black private school. I want him to see things I didn't see. I want him to see parents coming in from their jobs and wearing their college sweaters and that pretty much that *A Different World* side that we didn't see when some of us just saw *Boys in the Hood*, (laughter) - if you don't mind my reference.

As a researcher, I felt compelled to consider this statement to be widely paradoxical to the plight of preschool choice for many parents in the Black community. I also felt that this statement accurately defines Theme Four and contextualizes these parents' future aspirations for their children when considering what they are systemically up against in the US system of education.

Socially, Black children growing up in the 1980's and 1990's were exposed to different, yet equally real depictions of everyday life in the Black community through media. Also, important to note is that both portrayals Ms. Erica referenced highlight the non-monolithic, class spectrum of the Black community and both have connections to the city of Atlanta. First, the movie *Boyz in the Hood* showed the anguish of living and escaping poverty and gang violence in Black low-income communities during the crack/cocaine crisis in Inglewood, California. Young Black adolescents were exposed to dire community and social conditions with little support from local social services or law enforcement to better their communities. At the end of the movie,

only two Black friends are able to attend college at Morehouse and Spelman, in Atlanta. Then, *A Different World* was a television series that depicted everyday college and to an extent, professional life at an HBCU in Virginia, but was filmed on the campuses of Clark Atlanta University and Spelman College in Atlanta. The series, which depicted Blacks to retain a healthy racial, academic, and communal identity. It was so immensely popular and inspirational among youth in the Black community that it has been widely named as a catalyst for increased enrollment into HBCU's even through modern day syndication.

In conclusion, Ms. Erica's "more of/less than" or "push/pull" characterization of preschool choice in her statement summarized the closely held sentiments middle and upper-income Black parents engender when considering public and private preschool options across Atlanta, Georgia. As Ms. Erica emphasized what she wanted her son to see and be exposed to, the parents in this study believed that exposure to quality preschool education can improve their child's trajectory and class status. In the United States, the common thread to escaping the conditions that sustain a poor caste status in the Black community (as portrayed in *Boyz in the Hood*) to instead pursuing conditions that perpetuate a higher social class status and livelihood (as portrayed in *A Different World*) is access to quality education. As it relates to this current study, child-centered, play-based settings where positive environments that fostered a love of learning and social-emotional development early on served as strongly preferred and subsequently chosen characteristics of settings that parents felt would allow their child to both envision and then internalize a successful academic identity. Therefore, with a coupled generational and community focus, the parents in this study felt the current preschool choices they make will send their children into future economic trajectories. In conclusion, the parents in

this study chose private preschools because they wanted to increase their chances of improving the future qualities of life of their children.

Discussion of Emerging Theory in Relation to the Research Questions

Charmaz (2016) asserted that constructivist grounded theory "can enhance critical inquiry" as critical inquiry addresses "power, inequality, and injustice" (p.34). Stake (1978) implores that the case study's aims should be "understanding, extension of experience, and increase in conviction in that which is known…" (p.6). The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory case study was to understand the ways Black middle-class mothers navigate the early childhood education market and how their perceptions of preschool quality and school readiness direct that navigation. The following research questions guided the study: 1) How do Black middle-class mothers of children enrolled in private preschool settings navigate the preschool education market in Georgia? and 2) How do Black middle-class mothers of children enrolled in private preschool settings conceptualize their priorities around indicators of preschool quality and school readiness during their preschool search?

As of result of critically inquiring about the Black middle-class parents' experiences of enrolling their children in private preschools we can come to understand their convictions with a new lens to measure preschool choice. The research questions in this study were answered by the ways in which the study participants grounded their previous lived experiences in their preschool search and how those experiences subsequently allowed the themes to materialize.

Question #1 How do Black middle-class mothers of children enrolled in private preschool settings navigate the preschool education market in Georgia?

Chaudry, Henly, and Myers (2010) offer three distinct conceptual frameworks to understand childcare decision-making in the US: the economic consumer choice framework, the

heuristics and biases framework, and the social network framework. The consumer choice framework assumes that parents optimize their constraints (i.e. budget, etc.) and make tradeoffs on factors of convenience, cost, and quality when making decisions. The parents in this study did not have income as an overall constraint, per se, to finding additional preschool options for their children. Also, the consumer choice framework does not aid in explaining how race and ethnicity play a role in childcare choices (Liang, Fuller, Singer, 2000).

Next, the heuristics and biases framework would assume the ways consumers make decisions out of their simplifying strategies are related to their subjective construal of an unfavorable type of early education setting (Chaudry, Henly, and Myers, 2010). It may help to perhaps explain the behaviors behind how participants enrolled their child in private settings partially due to the close availability of information about those recommended settings in their social networks and how biases against public pre-k enrollment are formed from previous negative experiences in public education. And since seven parents in this study at some point chose, although temporarily, daycares, family childcare settings, a nanny, and/or maternal grandparents for childcare, this framework would also not account for the utilization of the widespread variety of settings used by these Black mothers. Additionally, both consumer choice and the heuristics and biases framework would need to be engaged in tandem in future research in order to better capture the implications behind the decisions for Black parents to choose private enrollment in this study.

The social network framework, which centers around social interactions and network resources, asserts that social networks comprised of family, coworkers, and neighbors, etc. serve four distinct functions: 1) provide information, 2) offer support, 3) confer social status and impart social recognition, and 3) exert influence over their members (Chaudry, Henly, and

Myers, 2010; Lin, 2001). This framework most closely applies to the current study in the first three ways. In this study, parents often learned about private preschools through word of mouth within their social networks. They also received support in the form of strategies on how to seek out and enroll their child in a private preschool from other parents who achieved similar educational attainment and also maintained shared values around education. However, the decision to ultimately enroll their child in a private preschool setting did not necessarily stem from an influence from the Black community because, mainly due to income, most Black parents do not utilize nor define their identity from private school enrollment for their children. Nor did the parents in this study report any pressure from their social circles to choose private preschool because those parents who chose any non-private setting did not say they experienced any instances of exclusion or judgement or any instances of a weakened class identity for doing so.

The above frameworks come from the respective fields of economics, psychology, and sociology and illustrate the complex nature of childcare decision-making (Chaudry, Henly, and Myers, 2010). While the social network framework may be the most useful among the three in understanding the current study, the consumer choice and heuristics and biases frameworks may still shed light on certain instances of childcare decision making. Furthermore, the social networks and heuristics and biases frameworks are subjective in nature as it relates to class-based social norms. The consumer choice framework hones on objective constraints to preschool settings that did not apply to the parents of the middle- and upper-class households in this study (e.g. cost, distance, transportation, etc.) compared to studies of parents of low-income households. A significant gap each framework inadequately addresses, however, is the historical and social role that a Black racial identity would play in preschool choice in the US.

Therefore, the Black parents who chose private preschool for their children navigated the complexities of the early childhood education market in Atlanta by making positioned choices (Cooper, 2005; Ellison & Aloe, 2018). Meanwhile, implications of empowerment, control, and agency as reflected in the above themes guided these parents to make their positioned choices. According to Scott (2012, 2013), empowerment, control, and agency are key words in scholarly Black pro-school choice discourse (Pattillo, 2015). Those words embody the historic objectives Black parents hold on to when enacting the desired autonomy of school choice for their children, knowing their relationship with the dominance of the US education system has been wrought with the inequities, blocking their racial and socioeconomic advancement in society. Positionality is a term that comes from feminist scholarship and refers to how one is socially located (or positioned) in relation to others given background factors such as race, class, and gender (Maher & Tetreault, 1993; Martin & VanGunten, 2002). Similar to Ellison and Aloe's (2018) synthesis, the parents, as strategic thinkers, viewed preschool choice in the current study through the same lens of racial and economic inequality they associate with public education and the varying degrees to which Black parents experience agency in this policy field was strongly influenced by the social and cultural capital that Black parents possess (p.31). Consequently, the positions of race and class are centered in this study in such a way that the parents see their position of race as a disadvantage in a society that seems to insist on inequitable educational access. And toward a transactional accountability, Cooper's (2005) work would then suggest that a Black parent's class positionality "relates to the extent to which they are privileged, resourceful, powerful, and thus able to navigate and succeed within the dominant structure" (p.175) of the early childhood education market.

The waves, or income, involved in this navigation towards the transactional accountability of preschool choice came with options or choice sets. In other words, as parents engaged in the positioned choice process, they also delineated their preschool options by considering relevant criterion as a heuristic strategy (Chaudry, Henly, and Myers, 2010). Table 4.4 lists the teacher-student ratio and the tuition that parents identified, which were important indicators to consider. According to Bell (2009), the attributes of a choice set include its size, geography, prestige, and expense and can provide insights into the heuristics and shortcuts parents use to simplify the decision-making process. In almost every instance of preschool choice in this study parents used choice sets in some way and at some point, in their childcare search. These choice sets, as simplifying strategies, resembled informal or formal appraisals of preschool/daycare settings and served to organize their priorities in relation to their distinctions. Informally, appraisals for choice set inclusion took place during the tours of childcare facilities or to a lesser extent, online searches. For example, while Ms. Lizzie, Ms. Michelle, and Ms. Brittany all attended tours with their husbands, both Ms. Alexis and Ms. Ruby also made spreadsheets of their preschool choices and reviewed them with their husbands. Several parents toured at least a few childcare facilities, but overall only minimally weighed information from the online search results and online reviews (Goldring & Phillips, 2008). Again, as mothers, however, they all said they knew they would have the final say in their child's preschool enrollment. The role mothers and fathers assume in child-rearing and school choice also lends itself to explore preschool choice studies through the lens of gender, coupled with both race and class.

After considering their preschool choice sets within their positioned choices, parents also made their private preschool selection by considering the "push and pull" factors within the early

childhood education market (Ellison & Aloe, 2018; Goldring & Phillips, 2008). Push factors

were indicators or reasons to either withdraw their child from a publicly funded childcare setting

or to disregard enrollment in them altogether. Pull factors in this study served as indicators that

drew parents towards pursuing a private education for their child on the preschool level. When

parents were considering private schools, they are "not necessarily 'pushed' out of their public

schools because of dissatisfaction" but were more so pulled toward private school settings

because "they may perceive that parent involvement and parent communication are more easily

facilitated and valued in private schools" (Goldring & Phillips, 2008, p. 227). The push factors

for the parents in this study, however, are better characterized as the perception of "failing

institutions plagued by issues of disorder and unsafety, poor material conditions and low

academic achievement" as well as a "reductive school curriculum" (Ellison & Aloe, 2018, p.13).

Figure 4.1 shows the factors in the parents' search which are largely reflective of Themes Two

and Three. Overall, parents were either averse or attracted to a certain setting based on whether

they subjectively perceived that setting to be a daycare or a preschool.

Figure 4.1 *Push and Pull Factors for Navigating Early Childhood Education Market*

Push Factors
Higher teacher-student ratio
Unprofessional/Neglectful staff
Varying parent involvement
Inequitable resources
"Babysitting" (lack of curriculum)

Pull Factors
Nurturing teacher-student interactions
Consistent parent involvement
Low teacher-student ratio
Communicative staff & Positive school climate -
Village Effect
Engaging, Purposeful Curriculum

Push Factors

       The push factors were defined by the ways in which parents interacted with the process

of their search and what they were feeling when they thought about public funded childcare

settings. Again, the majority of parents did not tour settings they would consider to be "daycares." Nevertheless, between the parents who did and those parents who did not tour daycare facilities, they all had generally negative opinions towards them. These settings also housed Georgia Pre-K classrooms. Chapter Two discussed the inequities in resources that exist in education and the mothers in this study saw those inequities vis-à-vis during their tours. Therefore, these push factors describe the conduit toward their disinclined temperaments which compelled these mothers' maternal intuitions to first perceive a setting as a site of inequality and then subsequently choose against publicly funded settings.

Parents' push factors came from themes that reflected the parents' awareness of a connection between race and education as well as their sense of advocacy to get a quality slot for enrollment. Push factors were very subjective and became coupled with their previous experiences with race in their personal lives. After race, parents recognized how class, with its connection to race, can influence the level of quality and availability in childcare. Therefore, push factors, most importantly, represented the particular distinctions that these parents held about early education settings. When parents attended a tour, they attended the tour bringing with them their tastes and preferences in what their child should experience. In being both Black and middle class, parents knew what they did not want the status quo of quality early education settings traditionally marketed towards Black communities.

Instead, parents' lifestyle preferences aligned with settings that afforded more attention to settings that boasted holistic, long-term benefits for children. Ms. Ruby described her childcare search by leading with her motherwork (Cooper, 2007). "I will tell you honestly, the early stages, I did not consider cost. I was just really, it needed to feel good to me." The listed push factors above delineate the indicators of what they saw that did not "feel right" to these mothers. Ms.

Lizzie had her son, Genesis, enrolled in three different Northgate locations and also looked for diversity in the students. More importantly, Ms. Lizzie touched on many of the push factors other parents talked about: "I'll look at the curriculum. I feel like it is definitely important for a child to, no matter the age group of six weeks or six years old, they still need to have a curriculum in place. I definitely look at the cleanliness of the school. I look at the way I'm greeted from the time I walk in the door to the time I leave, the friendliness of the staff. Definitely find out about the background of the teachers and of the potential class for my child would be going into." The push factors represented in this study represent a potentially uncomfortable setting for their children. These negative factors can also contribute to a child's negative disposition towards school and academic achievement when they enter K-12 settings.

Pull Factors

Pull factors represented the indicators of an environment that values education, and for some parents, diversity. These factors were assessed based on the values of their social networks as well as what they observed to be both attainable and favorable settings for their children. Again, these 'push' and 'pull' factors center around early education enrollment. That is, parents who chose to enroll their children in one type of setting over another, and the "why" and "how" of that decision operate as the main points of focus. As parents, through either in-person tours or through perceptions, were 'pushed' from publicly funded settings they also still brought those same distinctions and tastes with them on tours of private settings. Pull factors, therefore, represent what these parents saw and appreciated during tours of private settings coupled with the "fruit" that Ms. Alexis mentioned where parents and children of the private setting exude the dominant behaviors and social norms of valuing education (e.g. parent involvement).

School choice is about control and that level of control was important to these parents. Ms. Megan said, "I do think there is a level of, like I said, autonomy with private schooling." Within that control, parents trusted their intuition in identifying settings with warmer, more welcoming climates conducive to the structure and temperament into which their children could develop. During the interviews, mothers often recalled their maternal instincts "pulling towards" or affirming a private preschool for enrollment when common elements of process quality were evident and consistent from the director and staff. Control in preschool choice for the parents in this study also served as a conduit to aligning their child into an environment that is expected, and likewise accountable to the enrollment transaction, to glean positive adult outcomes in the future. In other words, control represents access to a life path that may not necessarily be attained through children's years of experiencing the public school system. Ms. Ruby reflected on her advanced degrees and credits private school with instilling in her the drive to continue her education. She said, "And just kind of that trajectory I think started in the private school system…and it's one of those things if you stay on it, if you do well on this trajectory, it'll lead to a certain place." As it relates to transactional accountability, pull factors characterized the expectations of the private school's end of the bargain.

Furthermore, nine parents sought settings that were diverse while the other parents chose predominantly Black settings at some point for their child. There was diversity among the parents in the racial make-up of their respective chosen preschools. Some chose predominantly White settings while others enrolled their child in mostly Black settings. Regardless of the racial demographics of a prospective private preschool, parents were pulled towards private preschool enrollment because they felt the future advantages in life that they wanted their child to

experience would be best fostered in an atmosphere where the child's social-emotional

development through play-based, child-centered curriculum models take center stage.

Question #2 How do Black middle-class mothers of children enrolled in private preschool settings prioritize indicators of preschool quality and school readiness during their preschool search?

The parents in this study considered preschool quality and school readiness to be very

subjective. Studies of middle-class perceptions of quality in preschool are scarce. However,

recent literature about low-income Black parents' satisfaction highlight how subjective the

perceptions of quality can be. To illustrate, I will highlight two studies comprising of mostly or

almost entirely Black parents of low-income households as it relates to perceptions of quality in

early childhood education (Bassok, Markowitz, Player, & Zagardo, 2018; Forry, Shimkin,

Wheeler, & Bock, 2013). I will discuss the relevance of the current study's results to these

respective studies first and then discuss the results of school readiness priorities below. Table 4.3

lists the overall collective priorities in preschool quality and school readiness. Note, only three

parents used the blank index card to provide an open-ended addition to what they conceptualize

to be important to preschool quality. Those write-ins were: (Building) Security, Culturally

Responsive Setting, and Technology. For the School Readiness stimulus activity, only two

parents had open-ended write-in indicators: Critical Thinking Skills and Attitude towards

School/Learning.

Preschool Quality

Forry, Shimkin, Wheeler, and Bock (2013) found that low-income Black mothers value

their top priorities for childcare as availability (location and hours), health and safety, and

provider's characteristics followed by cost, classroom environment, and structured learning.

Furthermore, the specific elements of those priorities that parents cited in that study included

how the childcare environment looked, how the staff interacted, and the provider's personalities. What is important to consider however, is that these priorities were the result of a written activity that the parents participated in and differ slightly from the results of the same study's focus group sessions. In the focus group sessions, the elements of quality child care that the parents emphasized mirrored the overall top priorities reflected in both the stimulus card activity and the respective interviews in the current study, including provider-child interactions, how children are disciplined, and the family-child care provider relationship (Forry, Shimkin, Wheeler, & Bock, 2013).

Table 4.3 *Middle-Class Black Mothers' Priorities in Preschool Quality & School Readiness*

Preschool Quality	School Readiness
Health & Safety	Social & Emotional Development
Childcare Provider's Credentials/Qualifications	Physical Well-Being
Teacher-Child Interactions	Gross & Fine Motor Skills
Family-Child Care Provider Relationship	Language Development
Structured Learning Opportunities	Reading Skills
Classroom Structure & Environment	Math Skills
Provision of Activities	Positive Racial Identity
Promoting Academic Skills in Children	
Use of Curriculum	
Arts & Creativity	
Cost & Convenience	
Provider's Disposition	
Availability	
Racial Diversity	
Bilingual Learning Opportunities	

As in the current study, Bassok, Magouri, Markowitz, and Player (2018) found that parents felt essential early childhood education features should include warm teachers, a clean and safe environment, and academic support while convenience factors like location and hours

were less emphasized in their preschool search. In relations to structural and process quality indicators, the parents in this study wanted their child's health and safety as their top priority and they generally felt that a childcare provider's ability to do so would be based on their experiences with children as a main qualification or credential.

Again, the priorities these parents listed in Table 4.3 were widely subjective. Many parents' prioritization of the fifteen total indicators ultimately comprised a broad and deep array of hierarchal combinations among the parents. However, the top four indicators, Health & Safety, Childcare Provider's Credentials/Qualifications, Teacher-Child Interactions, and Family-Child Care Provider Relationship appeared the most frequently across all parents. Only a few parents also noted that they considered multiple quality indicators to be equal or tied for certain ranking positions (e.g. Ms. Ramona prioritized Classroom Structure & Environment and Structured Learning Opportunities equally, after several other indicators). Teacher-Child Interactions being listed towards the top was an imperative result because it also correlated to parents' prioritization in school readiness aspects also listed in the above table. Coupled with the importance of these interactions, this indicator also included parents' affinity for low teacher-student ratios. Parents often lauded the quality of classroom instruction and interactions their child was receiving because the private school classrooms would be between 1:5 – 1:7. Further discussion on the correlation of teacher-child interactions and school readiness will be explained below.

Parents often emphasized not only teachers but the entire staff and their temperament towards their family. As transactional accountability involved the pursuit of an early education environment that values education from top to bottom, parents in this study felt that the intentional relationship that a preschool seeks to foster with their family took high priority in

developing their child's love for learning. This feature significantly influenced their private preschool selection. Specifically, staff-parent communication and parent involvement were specific elements that parents felt were key catalysts to a healthy relationship between their families and the private preschools (Goldring & Phillips, 2008) and served as a key driver for their unanimous satisfaction with their respective private preschool selections. Furthermore, parents seeking transactional accountability would consistently espouse their criteria with a positive family-childcare provider relationship, suggesting its high importance during the stimulus activity. In so doing, parents relied mostly on their social network to secure enrollment in private preschool and also independently investigated school quality to see of it was a good fit for their child. This strategy reflects similar literature of socioeconomically advantaged parents' navigation of the school choice landscape (Altenhofen, Berends, & White, 2016).

Lastly, it is important to highlight how literature around parents' perceptions of preschool quality can vary widely due to its subjective nature, which again also holds true for the current study. In a 2017 working paper, Bassok, Markowitz, Player, and Zagardo asked the question, "Do parents know 'high quality' preschool when they see it?" and they published their findings in an article (2018) that includes a survey of preschool program features of low-income parents with children enrolled in varying types of ECE settings in Louisiana, including pre-kindergarten, who accept public funding. From their study with 67% of participants representing Black households, they found that 70% of parents were satisfied with their early childhood education selections, but "just 44% reported that teacher–child interaction was among their favorite features, 12% selected program environment, 23% selected convenience, and just 6% selected affordability" (Bassok, Markowitz, Player, and Zagardo, 2018, p.8). The results of that study are

inconsistent with the results of the current study where program environment and teacher-child interactions were prioritized more significantly.

Table 4.4 *Parents' Reported Tuition & Teacher-Student Ratios*

Parent	Teacher Student-Ratio	Tuition/Cost (per month)
Ms. Lizzie	1:6	$1500
Ms. Alicia	1:6	1500
Ms. Ramona	1:7	1500
Ms. Erica	1:12	333
Ms. Michelle	1:12	1,200
Ms. Ruby	1:9	1,333
Ms. Megan	1:10	225*
Ms. Alexis	1:8	550
Ms. Brittany	1:6	880
Ms. Beyoncé	1:6	667
Ms. Kendra	1:7	900
Georgia Pre-K	*1:11*	*$4,411 (state per-pupil expenditure per year)**

*half-day program   **(NIEER, 2019)

School Readiness

The results of this study contradict the results of previous literature that found African American parents to believe socioemotional aspects of school readiness were not prioritized as a critical skill for children to possess before entering school compared to other school readiness domains (Barbarin et al., 2008). The parents in this study considered their child's socioemotional development to be a key priority along with their child's physical well-being. Here, school readiness for these parents suggests that they considered the values of Themes One and Two where spirit murdering and school discipline negatively affect a Black students' ability to maximize learning (Love, 2016). Social & Emotional Development was not ranked at the top for every parent, nor was Physical Well-being ranked second for every parent. However, the ranking of the School Readiness indicators in Table 4.3 above highlights the average placement of indicators in rank order of the seven total school readiness aspects. Overall parents felt that their child's development was heavily predicated on their comfort and safety within the preschool

environment. They generally felt that children should learn to work in groups, follow instructions, and know basic colors, numbers, and shapes. Each parent had their own priorities but typically came back to emphasizing their child's preschool environment and its effect on their learning.

Again, these rankings were very subjective in nature and often involved parents voicing their affinity for certain indicators to have equal value. Across all parents, their top five indicators varied but had commonalities as they all generally appeared closer to towards the top of the parents' respective lists. Gross & Fine Motor Skills and Language Development were listed in varying importance but was emphasized as a priority after they feel their child's preschool surroundings are safe and welcoming. Parents' emphasis of speech patterns and conversation may also play a role in parents prioritizing Language Development soon rather later in the order of the stimulus cards. Reading Skills and Math Skills were very important to parents in their interviews, but they generally felt that their child would not necessarily have a strong math and literacy foundation if their child did not have those top priorities of Social & Emotional Development and Physical Well-being in place first. In other words, parents valued Social & Emotional Development to be connected to their child's openness and disposition towards learning and was necessary for learning to take place perpetually throughout the child's academic lifetime. Lastly, parents did not generally value Positive Racial Identity as a top indicator of school readiness. Instead parents overall felt that it was their job to foster their child's racial identity in the home and community, often citing the lack of an appreciation for Black history and culture in US school curriculums.

Also note, Table 4.1 highlights that the children range in age from four- to six-years old. All but two parents had children in pre-kindergarten classrooms or were starting pre-kindergarten

at the time of their interviews. The other two parents had children who recently completed kindergarten. The results of the quality stimulus cards and the interview responses reflect a keen awareness of parents' desire to pursue settings that will prepare their children's development for adulthood, first emotionally but also behind a simultaneously growing intellectual backdrop. The results of this study also suggest that parents' social networks and their independent research for preschools may help in the selection process – and their child's comfort and safety are paramount. Most importantly, these results suggest how the mothers' maternal intuition allowed them to approach preschool choice by starting with the end in mind – a goal of achieving a lifelong love for learning, post-secondary education, and/or independent entrepreneurship for their children as adults.

The school readiness perception results are consistent with previous studies where Black parents place a high priority on socioemotional school readiness skills (Puccioni, 2015, 2018). None of the parents in this study had a completely academic-focused outlook on school readiness. Again, all of the parents in this study had children who were currently enrolled or had recently completed pre-kindergarten in a private setting. Parents felt that their child's behavior at school, their ability to converse and interact with peers and adults, and their overall disposition towards school and learning were the overall objectives of school readiness. In doing so, they placed lesser importance on reading and math skills as critical for kindergarten entry. Therefore, the stimulus results differed slightly in that parent's priorities for school readiness were not fully captured in the stimulus activity. This observation suggest that Black middle class parents' habitus may subconsciously hold onto socially-constructed, dominant middle-class values as a path to their children's future upward social mobility (Lofton & Davis, 2014; Merolla, 2014). Learning through play therefore reflects a class-based value within social reproduction:

> Child-rearing…treats the child as a sort of apprentice who must discover his body and the world through exploration; and, blurring the boundaries between work and play, duty and pleasure, it defines play as muscular and mental learning and therefore a necessary pleasure, subjectively agreeable and objectively indispensable, thus making pleasure a duty for children and parents (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 368-369).

The results of this study are also consistent with previous literature that may indicate middle-income parents spending more time at home with their children on academic skills compared to lower-income parents, for a variety of reasons (DeFlorio & Beliakoff, 2015). Lastly, the current study's findings suggest that parents do not expect schools to bear the burden of doing all the teaching as parents would often supplement preschool learning with home-based activities and experiences (Lareau, 2000, 2014).

Chapter Summary

The Brown v Board of Ed decision has had lingering effects as experienced by the parents in this study. Most poignant is the concept of desegregation and the objective to increase access to quality education regardless of race. The parents in this study do not believed that the current system of education and preschool education are equitable for all families. As a result, they have pursued enrollment in private preschool settings that help circumvent the limited access that Black families have to quality early childhood education settings in metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia.

The parents in the study leveraged their class and sometimes racial identity to gain access to inequitable system of childcare. These parents enrolled their children in private preschool because they saw it as an opportunity for better chances at their children's future economic mobility. Their income ability allowed them access to preschool spaces that they otherwise would not be able to experience. When considering the historical negative treatment of Black students in US public education, these parents chose private preschool because they felt it would

foster greater amounts of social-emotional development in their children as well as introduce a broader holistic curriculum for school readiness.

The study's objective was to understand the reasons why Black middle class parents enroll their children in private preschool settings and to understand their perceptions of preschool quality and school readiness. All of the parents were deterred from public preschool settings either based on previous personal educational experiences, firsthand experiences from enrolling their child in a publicly-funded preschool, or because of the perception of a lack of quality teacher-child interactions and professionalism. The aspirations these parents had for their child's academic and post-secondary careers seemed to hinge on a positive, constructive head start in life with enrollment in private preschool – a head start they did not feel they would get for their children if they had enrolled them in Georgia Pre-K.

There were consistent reasons as to why the study participants enrolled their children in private preschool. Because social networks are key to information sharing, almost all of the parents chose their preschool based on word of mouth of their peers. All of the parents chose private preschool because the saw it as an opportunity for their children to have educational experiences. Parents were attracted to learning through play-based curriculum, a STEM emphasis, as well as the transparency and attentiveness of the private preschool teachers and directors. They also felt that private preschool would benefit their children because of the level of attention their child would get in their small class sizes and intentional teaching strategies that fostered a love for learning early in the child's life. Lastly, parents saw private preschool enrollment as investment in their future education, independence, and social mobility in their children's adulthood.

CHAPTER V
SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

"The insistent problem of human happiness is still with us. We American Negroes are not a happy people. We feel perhaps as never before the sting and bitterness of our struggle. Our little victories won here and there serve but to reveal the shame of our continuing semislavery and social caste. We are torn asunder within our own group because of the rasping pressure of the struggle without. We are as a race not simply dissatisfied, we are embodied Dissatisfaction."

-W.E.B. Du Bois, 1973, p. 107

This qualitative case study explored and investigated the ways Black middle-class parents navigated the early childhood education market in Atlanta, Georgia and how they perceived preschool quality and school readiness. To address their perceptions and decision-making process, two research questions guided the study:

1. How do Black middle-class mothers of children enrolled in private preschool settings navigate the preschool education market in Georgia?

2. How do Black middle-class mothers of children enrolled in private preschool settings perceive preschool quality and school readiness during their preschool search?

Summary of the Study

This study explored the perceptions of parents and therefore required a qualitative case study to understand the implications behind their private preschool choice decision-making. In order to observe this phenomenon, the research used the lens of intersectionality. Intersectionality is important because it addresses the ways parents balance their identities, both race and class respective and collectively, to make decisions and navigate their realities. Data analysis underwent a constructivist grounded theory approach. The purpose of the study was to understand preschool choice from a public vs. private context, as well as to understand how race and class influence those contexts.

The case was bound to include on those Black mothers who have enrolled their children in private preschool settings within the past two schoolyears and live in metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia. Atlanta, Georgia was chosen because of its historic experiences with race and education and its close proximity to the researcher. Participants were selected via purposeful and later, snowball sampling to recruit a total of 12 parents, eleven mothers and one father.

Each mother participated in the interview and stimulus activity, while the father participated in the interview with the mother of his child. During each audio-recorded interview was a stimulus activity. The stimulus activity had two parts: one that focused on preschool quality and the other focused on school readiness. The activity was conducted by asking the parents to order the stimulus index card with indicators of either preschool quality or school readiness in order of their priorities. In addition to the interview and stimulus activity was the incorporation of private preschool information. This was done in the form of document analysis where information about curriculum, admissions, the mission and vision statement, cost, educational philosophy, and any other relevant documents found on the respective private preschool websites that speak to the values and objective of the setting.

Constructivist grounded theory guided the data analysis process while the use of Atlas.ti software allowed the researcher to organize and store of the interview and document analysis data. Coding occurred across all of the data and began with initial coding and then selective coding. To arrive at the themes of the data, the research employed a constant comparative method where I compared the elements of the substantive codes to ensure that they aligned with the larger picture of the phenomenon under study as it relates to commonalities across the parents' responses. The credibility of the study was established through triangulation and member checking.

Discussion

Four micro-level themes emerged from the data collection. Parent interviews and document analysis gleaned these following themes:

1. Parents Recognize the Race/Class-based Inequities in U.S. Education
2. Parents Portrayed a Dissatisfaction for Publicly Funded Early Education Settings
3. Parents Use their Social Networks to Secure Transactional Accountability
4. Parents Value an Early Educational Advantage to Level the Playing Field and Produce Independent/Educated Adults.

The micro-level themes came from the lived experiences of the parents in this study who had preschool-aged children looking for care. The themes came from an analysis that recognized patterns in the parents' responses and the responses were evaluated against studies that focused on similar subject matter and demographics as it relates to early childhood education choice. This was important because the results of the current study must be compared and contrasted to the larger body of literature that exists on this topic. These four themes are micro because they illustrate the parents' incremental depictions of the preschool decision-making process.

The themes above respectively further represent the values these parents held along their preschool search. Cumulatively, however, the micro-themes represent an overarching value, a bird's eye or macro-level theme of *caste avoidance for self-determination* (CASD). This macro-level theme represents the overarching behaviors and perceptions of the phenomenon and gives the results an additional perspective in conceptualizing the phenomenon under study as it relates to intersectionality and school choice. In the macro-theme, this study adds to the literature a more subtle, "hidden voice of the culture" of preschool choice in the Black community, as rationalized in the micro-themes.

All of the parents in this study said the have experienced some form of racism in their lifetime. Private preschool choice was more than learning rote numbers and letters and following

directions. Parents' decisions to ultimately choose private school enrollment highlights

underlying consequences to the child care crisis as well as the disparate environments children

can be exposed to, based on zip code and/or socioeconomic status within the Black community.

These parents used private preschool for more than an education. Their aversion to publicly

funded early education settings represented longstanding distrust for public education in the US.

Instead, these parents, who overall did not disparage Georgia Pre-K during their interviews, saw

education more as a competition and felt their children would not get the best available education

if they were enrolled in Georgia Pre-K. These factors heavily influenced parents' private school

enrollment decision-making. The competitive edge parents wanted for their children was

acquired through transactional accountability, or essentially the "unspoken contract" between

private preschools and their families.

In the end, the parents in this study were widely satisfied with the educational

experiences their child was getting for the money they were paying. (And quietly, seven of

parents reported that their children also enjoy the food that is served to them at preschool.) In

regard to the public vs. private preschool school debate, parents were searching for those holistic

and nurturing educational environments that they felt were typically not found in Georgia Pre-K

settings and were more consistently found in private settings. In the end however, Ms. Alexis

suggested that transactional accountability was only as good as the educational culture being

developed within the preschool, given the trade-off in costs:

> "So even with the Georgia Pre-K, there are perks and benefits, especially not
> having to pay for tuition. But what are you doing with?... So, say you can get the
> education; what supplementary programs - before, afterschool activities - are you
> utilizing with that money you're saving? So once again, it's not just about the
> program. Because I'm sure how the program is constructed, it's supposed to work
> or be beneficial - maybe just as beneficial. However, how you work the program,

and people who are willing to work the program, and put in the extra time, effort, energy. And a lot of times we focus so much on money…"

The parents in this study sought private preschools for their children through a transactional accountability relationship that provides asylum from prescribed public early childhood education settings that have historically devalued Black children's social-emotional, and therefore, educational development.

Caste Avoidance for Self-Determination

The Black middle-class parents who enrolled their children in private preschools in Atlanta, Georgia want their children to do more than survive (Love, 2019). These parents felt a "push" away from public preschool and a "pull" towards private preschool (Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Ellison & Aloe, 2018). The push away represents an avoidance of public education settings prescribed to the Black community that historically maintained inequitable quality resources and curriculum compared to White education settings. The pull represents a solution, contract, and/or a brokering of access to a resource-rich, welcoming early education setting for their children in exchange for paying for something that they can otherwise get for free in the status quo. And, with an overall collective objective of post-secondary educational attainment, parents wanted their own pursuit of advanced degrees and its commensurate income to be reproduced in their children as independent adults – since being exposed to an early advantage.

This CASD lens emerged from the parents' responses that centered on the inequities that they have faced growing up and the continued inequities that are prevalent today in US education systems. The parents' responses also reflect a deeper, oft-overlooked aspect of the lingering effects of the *Brown* decision that transcends a narrow desegregation-exclusive focus. The *Brown* case was argued on the constitutionality of segregation of Black children but was in turn decided out of concerns for self-esteem of Black children.

Not "Feeling" *Brown v. Board* **today**

The results of this study strongly suggest that Black parents still feel the effects of and therefore make preschool choice decisions for their children as a response to the social constructed caste status that the *Brown v. Board of Education d*ecision sought to address. The US education system was intentional in making children of Black communities feel inferior to Whites and subsequently behave in such a way. This study shows the great lengths and strategies parents are willing to engage for the purpose of avoiding their preschool children from being exposed to settings that they feel are historically meant to damage their children's emotional and psychological development. It also shows how Black parents have identified appropriate settings, both public and private, for their children based on the feelings or temperament of the environment. Because parents three parents in this study chose predominantly or exclusively Black private preschools at some point, this study also pushes back as a counternarrative to the historical fallacy that schools in Black communities are inherently inferior an ill-equipped to teach Black children (Morris, 2008). But does a private preschool education setting guarantee an appropriate preschool environment for Black children? My perspective on this is further discussed in the next section.

Furthermore, the results of this study edified the essence of Chief Justice Earl Warren's opinion in the unanimous decision where the critical nature of a child's identity is found in what they think about themselves:

> Such considerations apply with added force to children in grade and high schools. To separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone (Kluger, 2004, p. 792).

The values that parents placed around preschool quality and school readiness were starkly intertwined. Parents had a keen awareness that their child's academic success heavily hinged on their comfortability and safety in early education settings. Parents knew that their child's future academic success was tied to the way their child felt in the preschool facility and in the preschool classroom. They generally tied teacher-child interactions to the social emotional development of their child and made preschool decisions based on which private preschool would successfully be accountable in cultivating that academic environment for their children.

Biblically, it was presumed that Pharaoh's daughter had no children of her own but wanted them. And that circumstance further inspired her to defy her father's orders in taking pity on and caring for Moses. As the preschool choice curation started as a positioned choice for transactional accountability, the *Brown v.* decision also shifted the focus, contemporarily, from desegregation to inevitable diversity. More specifically, six parents recognized that those predominantly White private preschools lacked diversity and they saw that as a void. In preschool choice, some Black parents suggested they could curate their transaction by leveraging their racial identity in exchange for adding racial diversity to the private preschool's student body demographics. Parents recognized that they were at an advantage because private preschools' tuition rates marginalized families socioeconomically, but preschools needed racial diversity.

A Two-edged (Capital) Sword?: Strategic Divestment and Unintended Consequences

Within the pre-k conceptual debates is the underlying concern for adequate vs. quality education. In Chapter Three, I noted that this study is not a comparative case study but the underlying implication, however, revolves, in some ways, around the longstanding public pre-k vs. private pre-k debate (Zigler, Gilliam, & Barnett, 2011). The parents in this study all

eventually had positive experiences with their child's private preschool enrollment, but they did not all completely advocate for private preschool education. As Pattillo (1999) and Lacy (2007) emphasized how previous generations of the Black middle class have maintained relationships with the larger Black community, Morris (2004) reminds us that the Black cultural and social capital found in Black institutions (i.e. churches and (pre)schools) are codependent and help to develop strategies for success in a segregated world of racism and discrimination. Morris (2004) emphasized that desegregation's intent was to equalize access to education opportunity and expose Black children to better resources and education through enrollment in White middle-class school settings. However, race and academic achievement also contribute to the complexity of Black forms of cultural capital and education (Warikoo & Carter, 2009). Neckerman, Carter, and Lee (1999) coined "minority culture of mobility" to add to the complex curation of Black middle-class parents' behaviors toward society and education. It "emerges from the distinctive problems and interactions that upwardly mobile African Americans encounter in their inter-racial contact with Whites and their inter-class contacts with other Blacks" (Carter, 2003, p.150). The findings here suggest, however, that post-*Brown* predominantly White private preschools often struggle to develop and maintain positive relationships with Black parents, as expressed by Ms. Alicia, Mr. Sanders, Ms. Beyoncé, and Ms. Kendra, among others. Those school-family partnerships are important to young children, their disposition towards school, and subsequently their development. In this regard, private preschools may not be a better option for Black families because of the historic propensity for White schools to track Black children to lower level academic rigor, marginalized them for their racial identity, and disproportionately discipline Black children more than their White counterparts.

The parents in this study also recognized that their agency helps to positively shape their child's schooling. Oftentimes, their income status and social connections within their intersectional identity propelled their preschool search. Yosso (2005) explained, "one form of community cultural wealth communities of color have developed is navigational capital, which allows people of color to maneuver through institutions that were not built with them in mind" (p.80). This study highlights how income in the Black community can improve a family's navigational capital in preschool choice yet can also further segregate the preschool choice market for Black low-income families who also navigate an inequitable Atlanta preschool choice market (Scott & Holme, 2016).

Most importantly, the results of this study suggest that as Black middle class parents choose private preschools located away from Black communities, so leaves the some of the cultural and social capital that publicly funded preschools use to build relationships with those same communities. Harris (2013) illustrated how the current Cosby Cohort of the Black middle class maintains very close relationships and ties to the larger Black community while also living out a different struggle to do so, especially in a school choice context. Yet, similar to the parents in Harris's (2013) study, this study's findings show "that even privileged Blacks experiences a life that is encumbered by the complex intersections of race and class-status contradictions that they will have to reconcile, negotiate, and renegotiate throughout the life course" (Harris, 2013, p.183). As an unintended consequence, when Black parents no longer enroll their children in schools located in Black communities, the Black community perhaps would no longer incubate that same social and cultural capital that more strongly existed in the Black community and its institutions prior *Brown*.

Since the *Brown* decision, this study highlights perhaps an ongoing Black strategic divestment (Ellison & Aloe, 2018; Lipman, 2013) away from federally- and/or state-funded public education in preschools and more towards private preschool enrollment. This strategic divestment serves as the unintended consequence in that on the preschool level, it would negatively impact peer effects. Peer effects represent the influences that young students have on one another as they bring different levels of language, social-emotional development, behavior, etc. to the preschool classroom (Henry & Rickman, 2007). When students with low social-emotional development, typically from low-income households, are enrolled in classrooms with student who have higher social-emotional development and a mix of SES, positive school readiness outcomes for all students become evident as opposed to classrooms of only students from low-SES households (Choi, Castle, Burchinal, Horm, Guss, & Bingham, 2018; Justice, Petscher, Schatshneider, & Mashburn, 2011; Mashburn, Justice, Downer, & Pianta, 2009; Yeomans-Maldonado, Justice, & Logan; 2019). Even as Black children from low-income families bring their own funds of knowledge to preschool classrooms, classrooms with mixed incomes glean additional positive peer effects that boost learning from a reciprocal context. The results of this study suggest that desegregation unintentionally influenced, to a certain extent, a local divestment from Black community preschools, which may also suggest declining community capital.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The results of this study do not come without implications. Education stakeholders and legislators can glean insights on the process of preschool choice from an urban context. Preschool center directors and supervisors can better understand how parents choose preschools and the factors they look for. Teachers are of particular importance because they can better

support parents and students in children's social-emotional development. The results of this study can help preschools work with parents and communities to provide the care parents want and need.

Preschool Center Administrators and Teachers

Often mentioned by the parents in this study was the influence that a center director may have on whether or not a parent would enroll their child at that particular setting. Regardless of race, a preschool director has the ability to set the tone and objective of the early learning community that is being developed in the center and therefore in the children. The parents in this study were particularly keen on how they and their children were treated during their tours and were also keen on director and staff's level of professionalism and customer service after enrollment. Directors and administrators have a critical job in leading the culture of a preschool center and ensuring that parents feel that their child will be safe. Parents chose private preschools because of how they were treated. Georgia Pre-k center directors and teachers can rethink how they receive and react to parents of diverse backgrounds and cultures, especially parents from low-income and Black communities. Furthermore, Georgia Pre-k centers can more easily consider the ways in which they communicate with Black parents and families and how that can support better educational environments for the children. Lastly, professional development opportunities can continue to improve the manner in which teachers can better interact with their preschoolers.

Policy Makers

Preschool choice is still a complex process that envelops much more than simply serving a means to an end. As the results of this study suggest that quality preschool also means a better

livelihood in adulthood, policy makers should continue to make the calls to improve and expand access to the high-quality Georgia Pre-K program to meet the needs of the communities who need it the most.

Expanding access and improving quality can be a two-edged sword in Georgia. In order for the quality to improve, Georgia legislators should focus on lowering class sizes and give those fewer students more attention. But reducing the class size per classroom also means a reduction in access to enrollment in the universal pre-kindergarten program Therefore, policy makers should look to expand more preschool facilities so that additional classrooms can serve more of Georgia's youngest learners. An increase in funding should also go to improving teacher compensation. Increasing teacher compensation can serve two purposes. One, it can increase competition to ensure that the most knowledgeable and experienced teachers are working in preschool classrooms. Secondly, it can improve the morale of the teachers who are working in the preschool and in turn, improve the classroom climate and the teacher-child interactions.

It would also behoove policy makers to better understand cultural and social norms as it relates to preschool policy. Policy makers can reach more Georgia families when it considers residential and income implications and how that affects preschool choice. Parents automatically enter the early childhood education marketplace with preconceived beliefs about quality and school readiness. Policy makers have room to look more closely at the elements of preschool and pre-kindergarten curriculum so that it more closely aligns with what parents are looking for in a preschool and so that it can better meet the needs of K-12 curriculum standards.

In the same vein, policy makers can stand to improve communication of curriculum standards and indicators of quality. Aspiring, new, and inexperienced parents seek out information based on the information they feel would be accessible. Making quality, preschool,

enrollment, and recommendation information made readily available to Georgia parents would greatly improve parent agency and the assessment and evaluation of what is best for their child.

Future Research

As mentioned earlier, the vast majority of childcare and preschool choice literature revolves around the decision making of low-income parents, particularly from Black communities. Future research should include the "hidden voice of the culture," where Black middle-income parents who are not only choosing private school, but private preschool, are doing so for implications that should be further explored.

Additional research should examine the values Black mothers place on education from an early age and how that, coupled with the history of racism and classism, can influence preschool choice. When public education is considered a prescribed education, future research ought to consider the extent to which income and other socioeconomics indicators impact preschool choice from an inter-racial and/or intra-racial perspective. An interracial perspective would illuminate how and why Black parents seek private preschools compared to White parents. An intra-racial perspective would expand the current literature to push back on the narrow, monolithic school choice literature in the Black community and explore preschool choice from a position of capital and autonomy.

Lastly, the results of this study unearthed the underlying argument of adequate vs. quality. The center of the debate includes further research on the threshold that warrants an efficient education curriculum that equitably prepares all children for lifelong learning. As some scholars may exercise a lack of willingness in conducting race-based research, this study would suggest examining race, instead from a position of caste.

Limitations of the Study

There are some important limitations to this study that should be considered. This study included a small sample size of parents who all represent a similar racial and socioeconomic identity. The purpose of the study was to examine and explore the reasons why Black middle-class parents enroll their children in private preschool and their perceptions of preschool quality and school readiness. The Black middle-class parents in this study only represent a select group within the Black community who decided to enroll their children in private preschools and their responses cannot be generalized to represent the greater population. The theory that emerged from this study also should not be used to make a blanket application to the great Black community. As a constructivist grounded theory case study, it was most important to grasp these parents' realities as they have social constructed them before and during parenthood and objectively understand its implications to preschool choice.

According to Charmaz (2014), the interpretive nature of constructivist research "assumes emergent, multiple realities; indeterminacy; facts and values as inextricably linked; truth as provisional; and social life as processual" (p.231). In recognizing my role as a researcher, my influence in data collection, analysis, and presentation played a role in the results. With any qualitative study, the researcher and the participants co-constructed the meanings and values around the phenomenon under study and developed theory as a product of that procedure.

My own identities of being Black and a former pre-k teacher comprised the personal attributes that made me aware of my possible impact on the data. In my being Black I could relate to the parents' race-based experiences and having been a teacher I can understand the importance that teachers retain in school decisions. Additionally, Ms. Lizzie worked as a preschool administrator where her son was enrolled and may perceive a bias in her responses

around her son's preschool. However, since I am not a parent, there would be a disconnect with first-hand school choice experiences in the early education marketplace. In the end, the results of this study were intended to add to the current school choice literature with a direct focus on early childhood education and race/class implications.

Also, this study was not a comparative study between private schools themselves, nor was it a comparative study between the private schools and Georgia Pre-K. The purpose was to consider the subjective realities that guided the objective decisions made to enroll children in private preschool. Naturally, comparisons were made given the public vs. private debate, as well as to give general context to the greater preschool availability within the early education market. Therefore, the results and theory from the current study should not be generalized as a typical phenomenon state-by-state, nor as a recommendation for private preschool over public preschool and Georgia Pre-K, and vice versa.

Concluding Thoughts

The quote to begin this chapter gives authentic context to the underlying pursuit in the United States held by Black Americans for so long – happiness. For parents everywhere, the only thing better than being happy, is to see their children happy. But DuBois reminds the reader that the Black American struggle, in both its bitterness and small victories towards equality and racial justice, still forces a caste experience that stokes the dissatisfaction today in early childhood education settings widely made available to the Black community. The private preschools chosen by the parents in this study were not chosen as an output of competition within the market alone. Indeed, the parents often lamented the cost of tuition they were paying for their child and simultaneously felt it was worth its value. While they felt they were getting their money's worth, many hoped for a day where public schools would provide the same

satisfaction in the public school sector. When it comes to opportunity, these parents paid the

money for their children to be happy later in life as adults. And they wanted they children to

avoid the education prescription that repeats a continuing life of semislavery and social caste,

where opportunities for upward socioeconomic advancement are not nonexistent but limited an

inequitable.

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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Email

Greetings,

My name is Ian Parker and I am a doctoral student in the Education Administration and Policy PhD program, under the supervision of Dr. Sheneka Williams in the Department of Lifelong Education Administration and Policy at the University of Georgia. After graduating from Morehouse College I became a Georgia certified teacher (T5) and taught first grade and third grade in Atlanta Public Schools as well as pre-kindergarten in metro Atlanta. I am emailing to ask if you would like to participate in a school choice interview about your experience of being a Black/African American mother who has enrolled your child in a private, tuition-based pre-kindergarten classroom in Georgia.

I will be conducting interviews for my dissertation study to gain a greater understanding about Black/African American mothers' decisions to send their children to private preschool settings to attend pre-kindergarten. The results of this study are intended to provide a greater perspective of private school choice patterns among Black/African American parents in the context of early childhood education.

You are eligible to participate in this research study if you meet the following criteria:

-Self-identify as Black/African American
-Mother (or maternal guardian i.e. grandmother, aunt, etc.) of a Black/African American child
-You have a Black child enrolled in a private, tuition-based pre-kindergarten classroom in
 Georgia for the immediately previous, current, or the upcoming school year

All data will be kept confidential, and only aggregate data collected from parents will be reported.

If you agree to participate in the study, you will:

-Select a convenient time for your interview
-Participate in an audio-recorded individual interview that will last approximately 60 minutes.

Upon meeting for the interview, an informed consent will be provided. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact me at idparker@uga.edu or Dr. Sheneka Williams at smwill@uga.edu. Also, please feel free to share with other participants who meet the inclusion criteria.

Thank you for your assistance in this dissertation research!

Sincerely,
Ian Parker

APPENDIX B

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CONSENT FORM
Race, Class, and Private Pre-Kindergarten Choice: A Multiple Case Study of Black
Middle-Class Mothers

Researcher's Statement
I am asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigator:	Sheneka Williams, Ed.D.
	Department of Lifelong Education Administration and Policy
	Phone: 706-542-1615; Email: smwill@uga.edu
Co-Investigator:	Ian Parker, M.A.T.
	Department of Lifelong Education Administration and Policy
	Email: idparker@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study
The current study aims to help us better understand the decision-making process of Black parents who pay tuition for pre-kindergarten in a state that offers free, universal pre-kindergarten. You are eligible to participate in this study if you meet the following criteria: a) Self-identify as Black, b) a mother/maternal guardian and have a Black child, between three and five years of age, enrolled in a private preschool classroom for the previous or current school year, c) and a resident of metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia.

Study Procedures
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview that focuses on your life history, your various experiences with education, and the meaning you make of those experiences. The semi-structured interviews will be audio-recorded and will last approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview protocol has one main research question that will be used to guide the interview. An example of some interview questions are, "What were some indicators that you looked for when you were searching for a preschool setting for your child?" and "In what ways, if at all, has race influenced your decision to enroll your child in private pre-k?"

Risks and discomforts

This research study has limited potential risks associated with participation in this study. Some participants may experience emotional discomfort in reflecting on their experiences of being Black in their previous school settings. With participants revealing their thoughts regarding their experiences within their program, it is important to keep the participant's information confidential and their transcripts de-identified, to reassure the participants this information will not be shared with their child's preschool.

Benefits

Participation in this study can be beneficial through providing an outlet for individuals who identify with a marginalized group of people (i.e. Black mothers) to share their experiences and various perspectives, all while contributing to our expanding knowledge base. As we better understand the decision-making factors that guide preschool choice among Black mothers in Georgia, this information can be useful for future generations of Black mothers interested in private pre-kindergarten, as well as early childhood education providers and stakeholders who are looking to better understand the needs of parents from historically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Audio Recording

I would like your permission to audio record this interview so I may accurately document your responses. The audio from this study will be transcribed and the transcriptions will be coded. The investigator may use direct quotes from this study in future publications, however, all identifying information will be de-identified. Upon completion of the research, I will keep all copies of the interview and its transcription in a safe and secured location for one (1) year. After one (1) year all copies of the recording will be destroyed.

Privacy/Confidentiality

All information obtained during this research project will be treated confidentially. Pseudonyms will be used rather than your real name and the real name of your child's preschool. As a way to ensure the trustworthiness of the information provided by each participant and interpreted by the researcher, the researcher will provide each participant with a copy of the interview transcript for their review. If any information is missing, misinterpreted, or needs to be redacted, the participant can notify the researcher of what needs to be updated. My major role is to serve as a researcher seeking to gain more knowledge about the participant's experiences. When reporting findings, the researcher will take care not to include details that may identify these locations. No affiliations will be used in the findings. The researcher will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project, without your written consent unless required by law. After identifiers have been removed from the transcript the responses in the interview may be used to explore additional research questions in the future. De-identified information obtained from this research may be used for future studies without obtaining your additional consent.

Taking part is voluntary

Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw your participation from this study at any time should you become uncomfortable with it. If, for any reason, at any time, you wish to stop the interview, you may withdraw your participation from this study without having to give me an explanation.

If you have questions
The main researcher conducting this study is Ian Parker, a doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Ian Parker at idparker@uga.edu or Sheneka Williams at smwill@uga.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:
By proceeding with the interview you indicate that all of your questions have been answered and you consent to participate in this research study.

Please keep a copy for your records.

APPENDIX C
Interview Protocol
PRESCHOOL CHOICE PROCESS
RQ1: How do Black middle-class mothers of children enrolled in private preschool settings navigate the preschool education market in Georgia?

1. Leading up to the birth of your child, how would you describe your level of need for child care?

2. In your view, what are the factors that you consider when looking for a pre-kindergarten program?
3. Please describe the process you went through in deciding on a preschool program.
a. How did you find out about the private preschool where you decided to enroll your child?
b. Whose opinion do you consider reliable? Why?
c. How do you decide which opinion is more valuable?
d. Who in your family primarily made the decision on a particular preschool? program, or was it a joint decision?
e. How did you choose your place of residence?
f. Describe how much value you place on a school's advertising.
g. Would you say that you value other people's opinions or preschool facts (ratings, accreditation, school readiness, etc.) as more valuable?

4. In making the decision about preschool, was there technology that was used? Websites, Facebook, social media, etc.? Explain.

5. Do you believe there is a connection between someone's race/ethnicity and education in the United States? How so?

6. How has your race influenced your personal education experiences, if at all?

7. How have those experiences influenced your preschool choice decision-making for your own child?

8. Please tell me what you know about the Georgia Pre-K program and how to enroll a child in the Georgia Pre-K program. Did you know that GA Pre-K is free?

9. How did you determine that [your private preschool] fit your preferred preschool characteristics for your child?

10. What do you like most about this [private preschool]?

11. What do you like least about this [private preschool]?

12. When you think about how much per week you pay for private preschool, do you ever ask yourself if your child's preschool experiences are worth the price that you are paying?

13. When you hear the phrase "high quality preschool" what images come to mind?

STIMULUS Now for the next question, I'm going to show you these index cards that have aspects of preschool choice written on each of them. What I want you to do for the next few moments is to turn the cards over and place the cards in order of importance to you, as it relates to the factors you personally consider when choosing a preschool for your child.

      a. Walk me through our though process with what you came up with. (Why is X first and X last, etc.?)

SCHOOL READINESS QUESTIONS

RQ2: How do Black middle-class mothers of children enrolled in private preschool settings perceive preschool quality and school readiness during their preschool search?

1. How important is it for preschool children to start learning and get ready for school?
2. What do you think is important for children to know and be able to do at four years of? age or before they enter kindergarten?
3. How important is it for preschool children to play and have fun?
4. What would you say "school readiness" means?

STIMULUS Now I'm going to show you these cards that each have a word that represents some aspect of school readiness. What I want you to do for the next few moments is to turn the cards over and place the cards in order of importance to you.

      a. Walk me through our though process with what you came up with. (Why is X first and X last, etc.?)

Finally, I'd like to ask you some questions about the future…

1. As a Black parent, what does attending a private preschool mean for your child's future?
2. When your child becomes an adult and if they experience some form of racism, what role do you think their education would play into how they would handle the situation?
3. How much education do you hope that your child will receive?
4. What are your goals for your child's future?
5. Please describe your ideal preschool setting inside and outside, if you could build it and money wasn't an issue.
6. If a Black mother who couldn't afford private preschool was given a scholarship or a grant for private preschool, what would you tell that mother to encourage her to take advantage of that opportunity?

This concludes all of my questions for today. Do you have any questions for me? Within a week, I will send you a digital copy of today's interview transcript to your email address so that you can review it and make any clarifications to it that you may feel would give better context to your

responses. Thank you for your time today. I really appreciate you participating in my dissertation research study.

APPENDIX D

Parent Demographic Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in the research study. The following demographic information will be helpful in comparing your answers to others in the study. This information will be kept in strict confidence so that your identity will be secure.

Name: _____ Age: _____

Child's First Name: _____ Age: _____

Occupation: _____

Preschool Name: _____

Zipcode of residence: _____

Distance home is from school:

___ Less than one mile

___ Two to five miles

___ Greater than five miles

How old was your child when he/she first started preschool, daycare, etc?

_____

How many children do you have?

_____Ages _____Gender

Marital Status (circle one): Single / Married / In-home Partner / Separated / Divorced

Household Income:

____ Less than $25,000/yr. ____ $100,000 < $129,999/yr.

____ $25,000 < $49,999/yr. ____ $ 125,000 < $149,999/yr.

____ $50,000 < $74,999/yr. ____ $ 150,000 < $199,999/yr.

____ $75,000 < $100,000/yr. ____ > $200,000/yr.

Mother's Educational Level:

____ Some High School   ____ Bachelor's Degree

____ High School Diploma   ____ Master's Degree

____ Graduate Degree   ____ Doctoral Degree

____Other Degree (please specify): _____

APPENDIX F

Stimulus Activity Cards

SCHOOL READINESS	Physical Well-being
Math Skills	Reading & Literacy Skills

Language Development	Gross and Fine Motor Skills
Promoting Positive Racial Identity	Social & Emotional Development

PRESCHOOL QUALITY	*Childcare Provider's Credentials/Qualifications*
Health & Safety	*Availability*
Teacher-Child Interactions	*Racial Diversity in the Preschool*

Structured Learning Opportunities

Promoting Academic Skills in the Children

Classroom Structure & Environment

Cost and Convenience

Arts & Creativity

Bilingual Learning Opportunities

Family-Child Care Provider Relationship	*Provider's Disposition*
Use of Curriculum	*Provision of Activities*