Who's Missing from School Choice Research?: Black/African American Mothers' and Daughters' School Choice Decisions

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Using Cooper's (2005) framework of positioned school choice, and its orientation towards providing a more nuanced and inclusive view of how social power and privilege shape and legitimize school choice decisions, this basic interpretive qualitative study (Merriam, 2009) traces how four Black mothers and their eighth-grade daughters chose their high schools. We find the daughters largely controlled the application process and made the final selections of schools. Mothers played a facilitative role, providing their daughters with information from their social networks while supporting their daughters' independent goal-setting and decision-making. The study thus illustrates how school choice decisions for Black girls are fundamentally shaped by Black "motherwork" (Cooper, 2007). Our findings both extend current research on school choice by centering the experiences and decision-making approaches of Black families residing in urban, low-income, and segregated communities and open possibilities for more culturally relevant and aligned interventions to support these families as well as to reform school choice processes to be more inclusive and just.

Keywords: positioned school choice, motherwork, Black mothers, Black daughters

Introduction

Over the past three decades, school choice has become part of the fabric of public education in the United States. Millions of American families have experienced, if not

embraced, school choice options, the most prominent being magnet and charter schools. As of 2018, an estimated 3.5 million U.S. students attended magnet schools (Magnet Schools of America, 2018), while 3.2 million attended public charter schools (David & Helsa, 2018). These figures have doubled since 2008, when approximately 1.2 million students were enrolled in magnet schools and 1.3 million students in public charter schools (nces.ed.gov).

Despite its proliferation, school choice does not come without controversy (Lake, 2017). In some of the country's most racially segregated and poor districts, systems of choice perpetuate educational disparities (Campbell, Heyward, & Gross, 2017; Welsh, Duque, & McEachin, 2017). Family choice can also undermine the espoused goals of school choice by perpetuating existing achievement gaps and the concentration of poverty and affluence (Owens, 2018). Indeed, in highly segregated metropolitan areas, where school choice systems are often located, achievement gaps can be even larger (Owens, 2018). For Black/African American families residing in segregated, high-poverty districts mandated to participate in school choice programs, such programs may create a false choice among a variety of poor options.

Given both the ubiquity of school choice and evidence that it exacerbates persistent racial and economic educational inequities, a growing number of researchers have examined how parents choose schools for their children. These studies suggest parents consider several factors. These include school race and class demographics and proximity to family homes (Owens, 2018), as well as school academic performance (Bell, 2009; Ellison & Aloe, 2018; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Hastings, Kane, & Staiger, 2005; Henig, 1990). While these studies provide some important insights into parental choice generally, less attention has been paid to Black families and those led by Black women specifically. Such an omission is highly problematic as Black women are likely to be the primary or sole provider for their families (68.3%) in the United States (Glynn, 2019), and are therefore also likely to be the primary end-user of and decision-maker in school choice systems.

While Black mothers hold a powerful position in terms of their children's educational options, they tend to have far fewer resources than their White counterparts. This creates unique challenges. Black mothers must attempt to maneuver educational systems in light of intersecting institutional racism and sexism (Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 1981). In 2017, for example, Black women were paid 21% less than White women and 39% less than White men (Hegewisch, 2018). This pay gap has significant implications for Black poverty in the United States. According to the National Partnerships for Women and Families (2019), more than 1.2 million family households headed by Black women lived in poverty.

Problem Statement and Significance

Beyond the direct impact poverty and racism have on Black families and women, both also increase their exposure to lower quality (Whitehurst, 2017), more segregated schools (Urban Institute, 2018). In cities with the highest percentage of African American students, like Detroit, Newark, and Milwaukee (all districts with choice as a major reform effort), most Black students attend high-poverty schools (Boschma & Brownstein, 2016). Black families

are more likely to be exposed to highly segregated, high-poverty, and low-performing schools generally, and as their choice options. In this way, rather than calculated responses to school performance information, school choice decisions are fundamentally shaped by Black families' positions in intersecting racial, class, and gender systems of power. Yet, much of the research on school choice has failed to acknowledge this reality or engage meaningfully with it.

To address this gap and center the experiences of Black women and girls in the school choice process, we utilize Cooper's (2005) framework of positioned school choice. It makes clear that race, class, and gender influence educational decision-making (p. 174). Building on critical feminist perspectives, Cooper's (2005) theory conceives low-income Black women's engagement in school choice as "motherwork," or efforts by Black mothers to navigate power structures to ensure their children's physical and emotional survival and positive racial identity development. We extend Cooper's framework to consider how Black mothers and daughters positioned in a high-poverty district make school choice decisions. Our work is thus unique in acknowledging the joint contributions of Black mothers and daughters in school choice decisions. We ask the following research questions:

1. How do Black/African American mothers and daughters make school choice decisions?
2. What factors influence their decisions?

In the following, we first discuss relevant literature and trends surrounding family and students' school choice. We then delineate Cooper's (2005) framework of positioned choice and use it to examine how four Black mothers and their eighth-grade daughters chose high schools. Interview data about the mothers' and daughters' decision-making processes illuminate the multiple factors shaping their choices. These include the young women's career goals, school, and student reputation, as well as transportation constraints. We find that the daughters largely controlled the application process and made final decisions when selecting their high schools. Mothers played a facilitative role, providing their daughters information from their social networks while supporting their daughters' independent goal-setting and decision-making. Notably, mothers and daughters faced structural barriers that impacted their choice decisions. Still, the mothers continued to empower their daughters' agency and choices. The study illuminates both the sociocultural factors that impact Black mothers' and daughters' school choices and their agency. Ultimately, the study illustrates how positioned school choice decisions for Black girls are fundamentally shaped by Black women's motherwork.

Literature Review

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, an increase in intra-district choice plans has allowed more students to attend any school within their school district's geographic boundary. Inter-district choice plans have permitted more students to attend any publicly funded school in their state (Brouillette, 1999; Christie, Fulton, & Wanker, 2004). In many places, different types of choice schools (e.g., magnets, charters,

technical schools, etc.) operate simultaneously in a tangled web of choice "programs" and policies.

Though increasingly ubiquitous, the impact of school choice programs on student outcomes is mixed. Some studies find positive outcomes for students admitted to schools of choice through lotteries. Those outcomes include academic gains (Bifulco, Cobb, & Bell, 2009; Deming, Hastings, Kane, & Staiger, 2014; Jeynes, 2014; Rossell & Glenn, 1988) and reductions in truancy and suspensions (Hastings, Neilson, & Zimmerman, 2012). Attendance in magnet schools is also found to improve behavioral outcomes (Engberg, Epple, Imbrogno, Sieg, & Zimmer, 2011), academic achievement (Betts, Rice, Zau, Tang, & Koedel, 2006; Bifulco et al., 2009; Gamoran, 1996), and graduation rates (Flaxman, Guerrero, & Gretchen, 1999; Vanderkam, 2009). Other studies, however, indicate that school choice alone does not eliminate racial or economic disparities in achievement opportunities or outcomes. Persistent disparities reflect the barriers lower status parents face in moving to districts with optimal choices (Holme, 2002), while weaker teacher–student relationships in choice schools than in neighborhood public schools (Bifulco et al., 2009) suggest "choice" may not benefit all groups equally.

Parental Choice in Public Schools

Studies find parents select schools for numerous and varied reasons, including those related to race and social class. Henig's (1990) study of enrollment patterns in the Montgomery County, Maryland, magnet program, for example, found that parents selected schools matching their socioeconomic and racial group. Saporito and Lareau's (1999) study of White and African American parents' choices in an inter-district choice program found White parents engaged in a two-part process in which they first eliminated majority African American schools and then used factors like academic quality to make their choice. In contrast, African American parents did not use race as a factor, though socioeconomic status had a modest effect on their decisions. More recently, Hastings et al. (2005) studied parent choice in a district-wide school choice program in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg district in North Carolina. Though, overall, parents valued proximity in the selection process, families with higher incomes and those with children who had higher academic ability selected choice schools with higher average test scores.

Student Involvement in Choice

While research has uncovered various aspects of parental decision-making, few studies have explored how youth of color in urban areas make school choice decisions. One such study by Condliffe, Boyd, and DeLuca (2015) showed that a majority of the 118 low-income, African American participants (aged 15–24) applying to high schools in Baltimore's school choice program were the primary decision-makers. However, while they chose their schools, these youth also faced "considerable constraints imposed by the district policy and by their family, peers, and academic background," resulting in their selecting schools within a very limited choice set that did not "necessarily maximize their educational opportunity" (Condliffe et al., 2015, p. 1). These findings resonate with Bell's (2008) assertion that the

information and resources parents and, in this case, students, have available to construct choice sets could further constrain considered schools. As Condliffe et al. (2015) argued, the social context matters in decreasing educational inequality. Creating a more equitable education system requires understanding the sociocultural factors that influence young people's decisions in systems that fail to immediately recognize their agency and/or provide meaningful opportunities for them to exercise it. We turn to Cooper's (2005) positioned school choice theory to identify the sociocultural factors that shape Black mothers' and daughters' school choice decisions.

Theoretical Framework

Cooper's Theory of Positioned School Choice

Unlike rational choice theory, which suggests choices are objective or neutral (Chubb & Moe, 1990), Cooper (2005) argued school choices are "emotional, value-laden, and culturally relevant" (p. 175). In her study of school preferences among 14 African American working-class mothers in Los Angeles, California, Cooper (2005) found most were motivated to choose schools for their child to "become independent; compete against more affluent peers; protect and defend themselves in a racist society; and have more prosperous life options" (p. 179).

Cooper's (2005) concept of positioned school choice stems from Black critical feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1994), who characterized women of color's mothering/motherhood as "inextricably linked to the sociocultural concerns of racial ethnic communities" (p. 371). As Collins (1994) stated, "women and their families work collectively to create and maintain family life in the face of forces that undermine family integrity…this type of motherwork recognizes that individual survival, empowerment, and identity require group survival, empowerment, and identity…" (p. 373). Cooper (2007) suggested motherwork for low-income and working-class African American mothers "entails ensuring their children's physical and emotional survival, seeking power to improve their children's life outcomes, and nurturing their children's positive racial identities" (p. 495). African American mothers' positionality in choice contexts "relates to the extent to which they are privileged, resourceful, powerful, and thus able to navigate and succeed within the dominant social structure" (Cooper, 2005, p. 175). Hence, motherwork functions as a "form of political resistance to domination and oppression" (Cooper, 2007, p. 495), enabling Black mothers to navigate inequitable systems disadvantaging their community.

Positioned school choice theory argues that access to the market is the most valuable component of parental choice and is necessary for marginalized parents to successfully navigate and participate in the choice process. However, to do so effectively, parents require awareness of their options and sufficient economic resources to make use of these options (Cooper, 2005). Contrary to the assumptions underlying most choice programs, even if the same information is provided to them, not all parents possess a similar level of access to the choices before them. Furthermore, and in contrast to consumer choice decisions that might be considered more neutral (e.g., purchasing a vacuum cleaner, a brand of cereal, etc.),

information may not be the primary element driving school decisions. Parents make choices based on differing values, beliefs, information, and resources (Cooper, 2005). Not only do parents' choices differ, but these choices are informed by parents' social and political position, presently and historically, and the power and privileges afforded or restricted to them based on these positions. Again, in her study of school choice among 14 low-income and working-class African American mothers, Cooper (2005) found that the mothers "shared an adamant belief that their positionality, and that of their children, placed them at a disadvantage in schools and in the educational market" (p. 180). Furthermore, as providers, the mothers were clear that the financial sacrifices they made in their school choice decisions affected their personal lives. Still, the mothers were determined to find and exercise their agency for their families while navigating the choice process.

Given both that parents make choices based on their values, beliefs, and available information and resources, and that those who reside in high-poverty and urban areas face social barriers that limit their access and sociopolitical power, Cooper's (2005) framework of positioned school choice recognizes all choice decisions as legitimate. Unlike rational choice theory (Chubb & Moe, 1990), which is often applied in school choice research and assumes an actor's choice will maximize some objective, the reality is that families often balance multiple objectives that may pose severe consequences if maximized in isolation.

Thus, Cooper's (2005) positioned school choice helps scholars and choice advocates challenge concepts of "inactive choosers" and "non-choosers" that may unfairly characterize the engagement of low-income parents of color. Choice research has indirectly characterized Black families as uninvolved, uninterested, and disengaged with the choice process, furthering stereotypes that Black families place less value on education than other groups. Cooper (2005) argued, in contrast, that Black mothers' positionality in choice markets necessitates the recognition of their engagement as multifaceted and critical. She demonstrated that Black mothers are actively engaged in school choice processes and value education.

Cooper's (2005) framework of positioned school choice has been used in qualitative and mixed-methods research to center race and gender in the choice experiences of Black families. For example, in his work examining choice differences between two racially similar but ethnically different minority groups in the Hartford, Connecticut , Walsh (2012) referenced Cooper's (2005) positioned school choice to understand African American mothers' school choice decisions. Analyzing interview data from six mothers and a publicly available data set collected by the National Household Education Survey, Walsh (2012) found the choice patterns of high-poverty minority mothers were constrained by significant economic limitations. Socioeconomic disparities effectively disempowered mothers from generating social mobility for their children. In their synthesis of five studies investigating parents' lived experiences navigating school choice, Ellison and Aloe (2018) extended Cooper's (2005, 2007) work to Black families and other minoritized groups. They found that "parents hold nuanced views of urban school choice that reflect their positionality, report a

limited or circumscribed form of empowerment, and express a preference for equitable learning opportunities in their locally zoned public schools" (Ellison and Aloe, 2018, p. 1137). These studies help show why positioned school choice is helpful to understanding how Black families, families from other minoritized groups living in urban centers, and in our case, African American mothers and daughters, make choice decisions. Additionally, the studies highlight the concept's utility as a reliable framework for relatively small sample sizes. To date, however, few qualitative studies on school choice have provided insight into how Black mothers' and their daughters' positionalities interact to shape school choice decisions.

Methods

Our study aims both to address this research goal and to challenge dominant narratives and their biases regarding how and why Black mothers and daughters make school choices. Given our interests in understanding the lived experiences of Black mothers and daughters as they engaged in the choice process, we used qualitative methods that provided participants opportunities to share "thick" descriptions (Finlay, 2009) of their thinking around choice through their stories and narratives. To do so, we employed a basic interpretive approach to investigate families' school choice decision-making process. Merriam (2009) noted that researchers conduct basic interpretive studies to "understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (p. 23). As we discuss in more detail below, data collection consisted of interviewing participants to "identify re-occurring patterns" (Merriam, 2009, p. 23) of how various personal, communal, and sociocultural factors impacted the mothers' and daughters' school choice decisions. Such an approach is in keeping with other studies aimed at uncovering how various factors, including racial, class, and gender discrimination, play a role in people's everyday lives and decisions (e.g., Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015).

Setting

The young women in this study all attended schools in the "City" Public School District (CPSD) (all names of organizations and people are pseudonyms). Located in a region challenged by poverty and racial segregation, legal efforts to promote educational justice for students have a long legacy in CPSD. In the 1960s, this included the implementation of volunteer busing programs and the expansion of magnet schools as remedies for inner-city children deprived of viable schooling options. In response to a school desegregation court order mandated roughly 20 years ago, CPSD instituted a more formal choice process to address racial isolation and inequitable educational quality and opportunity through intra- and inter-district choice.

Amid the web of school choice options and configurations in CPSD, we focus on the options for eighth-graders. At the time of the study, eighth-graders attending CPSD could submit three separate applications: (1) the CPSD application (CPSD Choice Lottery) providing access to the district's magnet and public schools; (2) the Regional School Choice online lottery application providing access to regional magnet schools as well as suburban

public high schools available according to pre-assigned zones; and (3) the state's Technical High School System.

Participant Recruitment and Eligibility Criteria

Efforts to recruit parents and their daughters encountered some challenges. In early December 2016, a CEO of a nonprofit organization that provides programming to middle school girls in the district directed the research team to a middle school principal. That principal put us in contact with a school administrator whose primary duty was to support and guide eighth-graders and their families through the choice process. The administrator agreed to provide names and contact information of eight eighth-grade girls who met the eligibility criteria (explained in detail the next paragraph), from which two families officially enrolled. We went back to the school administrator who helped us recruit the remaining two families. Youth participants were eighth-graders and attended either a PK-8 or Grade 6–8 public school in CPSD. Adult participants were required to be at least 18 years of age and the primary parent or guardian of the youth participant. Youth and adult participants identified as either Black, African American, or Jamaican American. Participants were given $25 per interview as a means of thanking them for their time.

Sample

The final sample included nine participants, five adults and four teens, including three mother–daughter pairs and one trio of a mother with an adult and a teenage daughter. Table 1 reports the participant descriptions. The mothers' ages ranged from 33 to 55, with an average of 44 years. All mothers reported having multiple children. Sally and Briana were the youngest among their siblings; J'Adore and Simone were the eldest. The youth participants attended two middle schools in City and their ages at the time were 13 and 14 years old. The families resided in the northern part of City, with a population of roughly 24,000, and the location of City's most impoverished neighborhoods. The rate of poverty (49.35%) is significantly higher than either the city's (33.9%) or the state's overall poverty rate (10%). We follow precedence for small samples in qualitative school choice studies centering parents of color (Cooper, 2005, 2007; Walsh, 2012). To achieve saturation in phenomenological studies Creswell (1998) recommended a sample size of 5 to 25.

Data Collection

The first author interviewed each mother–daughter pair four times between January and November, 2017. Interview substance and timing reflected the school choice timeline. Interviews were completed after school at participants' discretion. Participants chose pseudonyms to protect their identities. Demographic information, including age and race/ethnicity were collected. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

We followed general inductive coding procedures (Thomas, 2006) beginning with close readings and consideration of the multiple meanings in the texts. Next, we re-read the transcripts to identify lines of text and individual words related to the study. Data were then

assigned codes and subsequent categories. The first author did the initial round of inductive coding. Thereafter, the first three authors met frequently to discuss emergent categories. This process was repeated until we had combined and collapsed codes into larger categories that best reflected emergent themes from the data. During this process, we used Cooper's (2007) theory of positioned school choice to analyze how participants acted on their motivations and interests in consideration of the larger social context, attending especially to how systemic barriers constrained their ability to access the choice market and information. We looked for constraints participants described about accessing information through networks and their concerns and understanding about school proximity and school quality. Finally, we compared how mothers described their role in the choice process with Cooper's (2007) concept of motherwork.

Researcher Subjectivity

Our social identities, experiences, and beliefs about public schooling and choice informed our data collection and analysis. The first and second authors identify as Black females; the third and fourth identify as White females. The first author attended school in a predominately minority district similar to CPSD. The second author taught in a magnet school in a district choice program. While we all taught and/or worked extensively with high-poverty public schools that enroll mainly low-income students of color, we hold various views on choice policy.

Trustworthiness

Because the time between interviews spanned from weeks to months in keeping with the school choice process, we revisited participant responses from prior interviews. We did this for several reasons. Commencing from previously shared responses helped participant re-engage in the study. As participants reflected on prior responses, they verified transcribed quotations and provided additional context on their commentary and their intentions (Bloom, 1996). Finally, we conducted member checks with the participants in which we shared summaries of our emergent themes with participants and recorded their reactions and feedback (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Findings

Personal Preferences and Incentivized Choice

The young women in the study were vocal about how they constructed their choice sets. For them, preferred schools provided certifications, college and career preparation, and job placement. For example, Briana wanted to earn a certification upon high school graduation and participate in dance and art programs. She selected schools offering such opportunities and prioritized these schools in her application by ranking them in the top spots. Briana stated decisively, "I am aiming for schools that I wanna get in to. I want to leave high school with a hair license, like the technical school [offers]." Simone, too, emphasized college and career preparation. She expressed wanting to "have the whole career plan ready for college."

While not oriented towards a specific job or career, Sally's school choice sets were future-oriented and motivated by financial incentives. Sally described a time when a high school representative came to her class to promote a work–study-like program that helped students find part-time jobs in their career areas of interest while earning their diploma. This opportunity was important to Sally, who was adamant about using her education to find a job and earn money. As Sally recalled, "Somebody came in to talk about that school, and that school seemed alright. The man said you can get a job, get money." She agreed this program feature attracted her to this choice school and embraced working while earning her high school diploma.

School Preferences and Dis-Incentivized Choice

Participants also used their social networks to gain information about school culture and climate (e.g., what would it be like to attend). The daughters and mothers reported that poor student behaviors and low perceptions of engaged student learning as factors that dis-incentivized them from choosing certain schools. For example, Phoebe, Sally's mother, said her biggest concern was poor student behavior: "[Phoebe] comes home and she tells me how the kids act. The teachers can't really control them and police come. It disrupts the class and she can't learn." We asked participants to describe challenges associated with attending City and non-City public schools. For non-City public schools, the perceived challenges were related to transportation and high academic expectations. For City public schools (in CPSD), perceived challenges were poor academic performance, decreased opportunities, and poor student behavior.

The mothers were especially vocal during this portion of the interview. For example, Charlotte, Simone's mother, perceived CPSD as incapable of providing students a "good education." She compared the schooling experiences of suburban students to those of CPSD students. A major difference, Charlotte said, was the availability of courses, particularly, social studies. She critiqued, "If you send them out to the suburbs, they teach them totally different—then they don't have social studies. [CPSD] don't have the funding and support to make sure that these kids get a good education." She believed children attending CPSD were disadvantaged in their preparation for high school as they lacked courses like social studies. Charlotte also felt the district lacked "an urgency for our kids," and that budget issues infringed on the district's ability to provide an education comparable with that in suburban districts.

Daughters also highlighted these disparities. For example, Briana believed CPSD did not provide a quality education. Though she participated in CPSD's choice system, she expressed determination to enroll in the technical school and described why CPSD was not for her.

> Briana: I feel like it shouldn't matter for the [CPSD] because I shouldn't be aiming to go there.
> Interviewer: Do you think students learn less there?

> Briana: [Pause] Yeah, they come off as schools that when you come out, you working at McDonald's…

These examples highlight how the mothers and daughters negotiated their decisions against systemic barriers. Racial and socioeconomic segregation that constrained housing and school enrollment characteristics also constrained school choice programs. The Black mothers and daughters recognized how these constraints contribute to achievement and income gaps that disadvantage poor students and students of color. Yet, they continued to assert their agency.

Transportation Limitations and Family Management

None of the mothers owned a car. Because the families relied on public transportation, their perceived ability to access schools geographically also constrained their choice sets. Schools seemingly further away or not easily accessible by public transportation were less desired. For example, Briana's mother, Sharon, preferred schools that were on the bus line: "As long as I can get to her [in the event of an emergency]. As long as it is on the bus line. If it's far, I can't get to her." In addition to safety issues, school proximity and transportation limitations also generated concerns about family routines. Simone's impending transition to high school meant Charlotte's daughters would attend different schools. Charlotte and Simone agreed high schools in walking distance would be ideal; a middle and high school close to each other would make it "a lot easier" for Charlotte, who took comfort in keeping Simone and her younger sister together.

Accessing Choice Information

Participants obtained most of their choice information from two sources: (1) their family and peer networks and (2) tracking perceived high-performing students' choice decisions. The information mined from the first included factual and anecdotal knowledge regarding schools' academic performance and student behavior. As described above, this information informed participants' school impressions and, in turn, choice decisions. An example of accessing networks for information and tracking other students' decisions was demonstrated in an interview with Phoebe (mother), Sally (daughter), and Melissa (adult daughter). We asked what they knew about a school Phoebe had initially identified as suitable for Sally.

> Sally: I don't know much about [City Prep], but I know that it has good reputation and kids learn there, I guess.
> Interviewer: How have you obtained information about schools?
> Sally: I just know because there are kids [who went here] last year, and those kids were really smart and they went there.
> Melissa (sister): I know some people that went there. And my mom told me some stuff she heard about the school, good stuff.

Here, Sally's impression of City Prep is based on what she knew about former high-performing schoolmates who eventually went onto City Prep (magnet school). Though Melissa and Sally engaged in indirect tracking of students they knew, their knowledge about the school's specific characteristics (i.e., the "good stuff") came from their mother, Phoebe.

In this way, Phoebe acted as a secondary, though vitally important, source of information regarding the school.

In addition to tracking the pathways of high-performing students, information derived from relationships with students and their families attending the schools being considered was also important to participants' school decisions. Charlotte (mother) and Simone's (daughter) experience is illustrative. Below is a snippet of the interview where they described a time when Simone's peer in an after-school program recommended she apply to her current high school:

> Charlotte: I know the program leader's daughter; she praises that school like constantly.
> Simone: She thinks that's a good school for us.
> Interviewer: What are some things they say about the school?
> Simone: That it's very good and highly educated, like one of the top schools in City.
> Charlotte: They give you college credits. You take a college course there and like half a college credit will go towards college when you finish. That's another thing they praised about it, too.

The information and feedback from social networks were used by the families to formulate their impressions. Students perceived as successful or high performing induce family aspirations to be selected to attend highly reputable schools. Families desire schools that reproduce opportunities and positive outcomes similar to those of students attending highly reputable schools. Furthermore, daughters who share academic characteristics with students currently enrolled in highly reputable schools may feel more optimistic in their chances of getting selected to those schools.

Finally, we learned participants indirectly tracked other family members' choice decisions and academic performance. Sharon talked about how well her nephew's kids were performing at one of their prospective choice schools:

> I really don't talk to them on a daily basis, but from what I hear, my nephew's kids are doing excellent. They are high honors, won a lot of awards, is learning and getting good grades, and teachers actually working with them. That's what I want to see happen to her.

Again, we see how families relied on their peer and family networks to formulate school impressions. Sharon, Charlotte, and Simone were able to pinpoint school-specific characteristics as opposed to the informal information offered by Sally and Melissa, who discussed less specific school characteristics.

Affirmations, Agency, and Independence Building: School Choice as "Motherwork"

Across the interviews, we were struck by how all the mothers deliberately chose to play a more supportive than leading role in their daughter's high school choice process. Mothers affirmed their daughters' choices in various ways. For example, Sweetie was confident in her daughter J'Adore's ability to choose schools for herself. In the first interview, Sweetie made clear her primary role was to support J'Adore's choice. Sweetie said, "I want her to pick the best school possible. I'll help her, but I want her to pick whatever field she wants to go in." In the second interview, we asked the mother–daughter pair to

reflect on the application submission process. J'Adore's submission process included her conducting an internet search for schools, discussing the schools of interest with her mom, and finally selecting her choices using her mom's input. Sweetie wanted to help but gave J'Adore the reins as Sweetie feared making a unilateral decision may negatively impact the outcome. Sweetie explained, "I don't wanna pick any school for her that she doesn't like, and next thing she's not learning, you know?" The other mothers too showed a willingness to allow their daughters to make school choice decisions based on their interests.

The mothers also considered the opportunities schools could provide their daughters. For Sharon, school choice was synonymous with opportunity. She emphasized informed decision-making and encouraged Briana to stay "on top of things with her counselor." To help Briana, Sharon gathered pamphlets on choice schools from the Board of Education and reminded her of testing dates and submission deadlines. She justified the importance of holding Briana accountable: "I just don't want her to just settle at the CPSD schools. I want her to be on top of things and fill out [the application] so she can have that opportunity."

Sharon's own experience with an earlier iteration of the inter-district choice program also motivated her involvement in the choice process. As a high school student, she and other Black students were bused to a more affluent, predominantly White district. Sharon recalled how she and other Black students felt "like we were an experiment" there. Eventually, Sharon returned to CPSD where she completed her vocational education. Despite Sharon's negative experience, she said she would support her daughter's decision to pursue a school outside CPSD. Sharon saw her role as helping her daughter navigate important life decisions and reinforced the value of striving for her goals. In doing so, she sought to foster Briana's agency.

Charlotte explained why she, and perhaps other mothers she knew, entrusted their daughters to make such a crucial decision:

> I guess because we raise them up the best we can, so that they can grow up and make these good decisions, and hopefully not make decisions we made in life. Go beyond our mistakes. That's what I give to all my daughters. I tell each and every one of them that: Go do better than what your mother did. That's what I want you to do. Better than me. And if they can do that, they'll make me happy. I'll be alright.

Charlotte sheds light on an issue often overlooked in traditional choice studies—the role of child-rearing and mothering approaches in the choice process. The involvement and support Charlotte and the other mothers provided reflected their efforts, as mothers, to forge a pathway to quality schools for their daughters that could overcome the barriers faced by their communities, barriers compounded by race, class and gender. Charlotte's desire for her daughters to "go beyond our mistakes" and "do better than what your mother did" is essentially a mother's plea for her children to survive, thrive, and acquire power in the form of both knowledge and self-agency and in the face of these barriers.

Discussion

This study focused on the positionality of Black/African American mothers and daughters engaged in school choice. We found that participants constructed school choice sets based on (a) the youth's college and career aspirations, school offerings, and curriculum; (b) school proximity, transportation limitations, and mothers' need to ensure their daughters' safety and balance their responsibilities for their other children; (c) information about school performance and reputation mined from family and peer networks; and (d) decisions of former classmates perceived as high performing. In addition, the mothers supported their daughters being the primary decision-maker in efforts to foster their daughters' own agency as a means of securing better school opportunities and life outcomes.

Participants' school choice experiences echoed all four components of Cooper's (2005, 2007) positioned school choice. First, access—in its dual meaning of information necessary to successfully navigate the choice system (Cooper, 2005) and proximity, or one's capacity to physically access prospective schools—was the most influential factor in the school choice decisions. Access to individuals with primary and secondary knowledge of, and experience with, choice schools was critical to all participants' constructions of choice sets. Family and peer networks also helped participants generate school impressions of performance, climate, and student learning.

Second, through Cooper's (2005, 2007) positioned school choice, we confirmed youth and adults faced similar structural barriers to choice (Allen & White-Smith, 2017; Bell, 2008; Condliffe, et al., 2015; Ellison & Aloe, 2018). That is, the information, resources, and choice system itself (i.e., available schools and their location (Walsh, 2012)), were influenced by participants' social and political identities. Our study highlights some of the systemic barriers impacting how choice sets are constructed. To illustrate, though none of the daughters wanted to attend a CPSD school, all applied to at least one. This decision was tied to safety issues and to mothers' concerns for meeting myriad household demands. Our study thus highlights the legitimate concerns that frame African American families' school choice.

Third, our study demonstrates how conventional (i.e., White, middle-class conceptions of engagement) can impose unfair judgments on Black mothers' and daughters' choice decisions. Cooper (2005) asserts Black mothers cannot be described as either active, inactive, or non-choosers in these processes. Rather, Black mothers' engagement is multifaceted and critical. In the case of our participants, the mothers' engagement supported their daughters' decisions and nurtured their daughters' development of independence and other skills necessary to navigating complex school choice policies and structural racial, socioeconomic, and gendered inequities.

Thus, the mothers' engagement in school choice processes aligned with the concept of motherwork (Cooper, 2007). It was anchored in specific racialized concepts of survival, power, and identity. Relative to White and/or more affluent communities, low-income African American women and girls experience school choice as an explicit policy and as an interactive system carrying a different set of meanings, benefits, and implications that extend

far beyond the individuals making such decisions. Choice, as it appeared based on our data, was impacted by, and contributed to, the health and prospects of students, their families, and the community at large.

Implications for Research and Practice

We recommend scholars seeking to study school choice decisions among African American families and girls consider Cooper's (2005, 2007) positioned school choice as a theoretical lens. The theory's critical foundations center the educational and social experiences of African American mothers and daughters. Additionally, given that disparate encounters with choice systems based on race, class, and gender are a reality in the United States, positioned school choice opens insights into how Black mothers fight for and empower their daughters to be resilient decision-makers. We need more studies focused on a larger set of Black mothers and daughters and their decision-making when navigating school choice systems to understand this more fully. More school choice contexts and different age groups should also be investigated.

The proximity constraints impacting Black girls' school decisions should also be of interest to those operating school choice systems. Not only do choice plans need to adjust to these concerns, but practitioners also need to help families overcome proximity barriers so the families can fully engage in choice systems. For high-poverty districts that rely on their residents to enroll in their schools, district leaders must acknowledge families' recognition of and displeasure with the educational disparities associated with remaining in the district. Overcoming these entrenched disparities will ultimately require districts' to forge deep partnerships with their families that respect the families' values, concerns, and knowledge.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand how Black/African American mothers and daughters make school choice decisions using a culturally appropriate framework. Our findings extend current school choice research by expanding knowledge about the school choice experiences and decision-making approaches of female-led Black families residing in urban, low-income, and communities segregated by race and income. We find, in this particular context where the district was compelled to desegregate by law, that Cooper's (2005) positioned school choice offered a more comprehensive understanding of how and why Black/African American families make choice decisions and how race, gender, and income shape their choice sets. It provides a robust, culturally appropriate lens to understand Black mothers' and daughters' engagement in school choice that legitimates their decisions. Researchers who conduct choice studies should utilize frameworks sensitive to and appreciative of the cultural nuances that inform families' values, beliefs, and desires and their relationship to school choice models.

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Appendix

Table 1

Participant Description

Youth Name+ and Age	Racial Identity	Adult Name, Relation and Age	Eldest Child/Only Child?	Top two schools by choice program type (CPRMS, THSS, CPSD)
Briana, 14	Black/African-American	Sharon, Mother, 55	No/No	THSS, CPRMS
J'Adore, 14	Jamaican-American	Sweetie, Mother, 33	Yes/No	THSS, CPSD
Sally, 13	Black/African-American	Phoebe, Mother, 46 Melissa, Sister, 19	No/No	CPRMS, CPSD
Simone, 13	Black/African American	Charlotte, Mother, 43	Yes/No	THSS, CPRMS

+ All names are pseudonyms to maintain participants' anonymity.