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A “PROCESS THAT NEVER ENDS”: PARENTS’ EXPERIENCES NAVIGATING A
PUBLIC PRESCHOOL LOTTERY

by

Jeremy Redford
A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy
Education

Committee:

_____ Chair

_____ Program Director

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George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

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Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

by

Jeremy Redford
Master of Science
Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007
Bachelor of Arts
Longwood University, 1997

Director: Colleen Vesely, Professor
College of Education and Human Development

Summer Semester 2022
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA



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Dedication

For Robin, Harper, Dylan, and Levi. Thank you for your love and support over these last 9 years. We did it.

“Everything worth doing takes time.”
-Bob Dylan

Acknowledgments

This accomplishment is not an individual one. There are so many people that I have to thank for supporting me through the years. To my mom, dad, sisters, Teresa, Edgar—everyone in Richmond—thank you for helping me become who I am today. Who would have guessed that I would have gone on to get a PhD? There are also so many mentors I have had that supported me both academically and personally. My education at Longwood University was the foundation for all this. Thank you to all the professors in the psychology and sociology departments who supported me in those early years. You know who you are and I think about you often. Thank you to Jennifer Johnson and Julie Honnold at Virginia Commonwealth University for taking a chance on me all those years ago and for helping me get my master's thesis published. Jennifer, it meant a lot to have you on my committee for my dissertation as well. Thank you for your time.

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And lastly, thank you to the generous mothers who volunteered their time and shared their experiences over the course of this study. You took time to talk to me about your experiences, and you did so in the middle of a pandemic. I hope these pages make you proud and that in some small way this study leads to meaningful change so all children have access to schools that best support them.

Table of Contents

	Page
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Tables	viii
List of Figures	ix
Abstract.....	ix
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: Review of Literature	11
Cultural Capital and Community Cultural Wealth: Understanding How Preschool Lottery Information Is Passed	13
<i>Navigating Institutions: Cultural and Navigational Capital</i>	14
<i>Social Resources: Social Capital</i>	19
Parent Decision Making in Early Care and Education.....	22
<i>Parent Beliefs and Preferences</i>	24
<i>Opportunities, Constraints, and Barriers</i>	27
How K–12 School Choice Informs Preschool Choice	29
<i>Neighborhoods and Gentrification</i>	30
<i>Choosing Schools in Urban Environments</i>	34
<i>School Choice Lotteries</i>	38
Context of Current Study	41
Chapter Three: Methods	45
Methodological Approach.....	45
Study Setting	49
Study Participants	54
Data Collection	57
<i>Recruitment</i>	59
<i>In-Depth Interviews</i>	61
<i>Demographic Survey</i>	64
<i>Quantitative Data File</i>	65

Data Analyses	68
<i>Qualitative Data Analysis</i>	68
<i>Quantitative Data Analysis</i>	75
Data Quality	75
<i>Quality of Design</i>	75
<i>Quality of Analysis</i>	78
<i>Quality of Research Processes</i>	80
<i>Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity</i>	81
Introduction to the Findings.....	83
Chapter Four: “Playing the Lottery”: Initial Processes to Identifying Preschools	85
“Kind of Nerve Wracking”: The Lottery Process as an Emotional Experience	87
“We’re Picking His High School Right Now”: What Mothers Wanted in Preschools	90
“Talk to Other Parents as Much as You Can”: Using Sources of Information.....	97
<i>Government-Sponsored Sources</i>	97
<i>Listserve, Online Groups, and Parenting Websites</i>	100
“A Certain Type of Parent”: Family and Community Resources in the Lottery Process	
.....	102
Chapter Five: “There’s No Way That You Will Get In”: The Informal Rules That Guided	
Parents’ Preparations of Lottery Applications.....	106
“Doing Our Best and Throwing Our Hat Into the Ring”: Housing and the Proximity of	
Good Schools	107
“You Are Just Wasting a Slot”: The Informal Rules of the Lottery	114
“It’s About How You Rank Your Application”: How Informal Rules Guide Processes	
for Ranking Lottery Applications	123
Chapter Six: “A Process That Never Ends”: Managing Children’s Educational Pathways	
Through the Lottery Results and COVID-19 Pandemic.....	129
“We’re So Close”: Enrollment for the 2020–21 School Year.....	132
“Who Knows What This Year Is Gonna Look Like”: How the COVID-19 Pandemic	
Impacted Preschool Planning.....	134
“Back At It”: Playing the Lottery Again.....	138
Chapter Seven: Discussion	144
Research Contributions	148
<i>School Choice</i>	148
<i>Theoretical Contributions</i>	154

Implications for Practice and Policy	157
<i>Lottery Preferences</i>	157
<i>Sources of Information</i>	160
<i>Have DC Lottery Make Suggestions</i>	161
Limitations and Strengths of the Study	162
Areas for Future Research.....	165
<i>More Diverse Samples</i>	166
<i>Utilizing Quantitative Data</i>	166
Appendix A.....	169
IRB Approval Letter	169
Appendix B	171
Listserv Announcement	171
Appendix C	172
Consent Form for First Three Interviews.....	172
Appendix D.....	174
Interview Protocols	174
Interview Protocol #1	174
Interview Protocol #2	176
Interview Protocol #3	177
Interview Protocol #4	179
Appendix E	181
Demographic Questionnaire	181
Appendix F.....	182
Participant Summaries	182
Layla	182
Evelyn.....	188
Sara	193
References.....	202

List of Tables

Table	Page
Table 1. <i>Percent Race/Ethnicity, Median Household Income, and Educational Attainment, Overall and by Ward: 2021</i>	51
Table 2. <i>Dates for the 2020–21 School Year</i>	53
Table 3. <i>Key Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants</i>	56
Table 4. <i>Data Collection Schedule</i>	59
Table 5. <i>Example Codebook Entry</i>	70
Table 6. <i>Final Selective Codes</i>	74
Table 7. <i>Means and Standard Deviations for DC STAR Ratings by Ward Among DC Public Schools Offering PK3 or PK4 Programs: 2019</i>	109
Table 8. <i>Means and Standard Deviations for DC STAR Ratings by School Type and Ward Among DC Public Schools Offering PK3 or PK4 Programs: 2019</i>	111
Table 9. <i>Means and Standard Deviations for Percentage of Black and Homeless Students in Schools by Ward Among DC Public Schools Offering PK3 or PK4 Programs: 2019</i>	113
Table 10. <i>Means and Standard Deviations for Waitlist Length on Results Day by School Type and Ward Among DC Public Schools Offering PK3 or PK4 Programs: 2019–2020</i>	116
Table 11. <i>Means and Standard Deviations for Acceptance Rates by School Type and Ward Among DC Public Schools Offering PK3 or PK4 Programs: 2019–20</i>	118

List of Figures

Figure	Page
Figure 1 <i>Conceptual Framework for the Study of Preschool Choice in Washington, DC</i>	13
Figure 2 <i>Map of DC Wards</i>	43
Figure 3 <i>Hierarchical Organization of DC Common Enrollment Lottery</i>	49

Abstract

A “PROCESS THAT NEVER ENDS”: PARENTS’ EXPERIENCES NAVIGATING A PUBLIC PRESCHOOL LOTTERY

Jeremy Redford, Ph.D.

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Dissertation Director: Dr. Colleen Vesely

The current study examined how families navigated the rules and admissions requirements of Washington, DC’s common enrollment lottery for public preschool. Informed by ethnography and case study methods, multiple in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with two Black mothers and one White mother over the course of a year to understand their processes for navigating the school lottery. Despite the lottery telling parents to rank schools in the order of their preference, informal rules were identified via lottery preferences and prior waitlist information. Race shaped participants’ school search processes as well, with both Black mothers indicating concerns regarding how some schools would treat their children. While all three participants reviewed DC data on waitlists, school quality, and academic curriculum, they still relied heavily on information from other parents to get specific experiences about schools. Despite an abundance of research supporting the importance of early childhood education on later outcomes, the mothers in this study downplayed the importance of

preschool, perhaps in response to the level of effort expended on the lottery process.

Their focus for the most part was on the later elementary years and beyond. Quantitative data on school demographics, waitlists, and school ratings are also analyzed to show how school- and ward-level structural constraints informed mothers' processes. The study occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a unique opportunity to show how families adjusted to school decisions during this historic event. By the last interview—about one year after the study began—all three mothers were participating in the lottery again.

Chapter One: Introduction

Comparing the Washington, DC, public school lottery to the *Hunger Games*, a *Washington Post* article described the lottery as “a toxic mix of the District’s touchiest traits—elitism, race, the wealth gap, privilege, ambition, piety, guilt, resentment, entitlement, gentrification, politics and location, location, location” (Dvorak, 2018, para. 5). Ironically, the current lottery system was supposed to reduce all of these things. Washington, DC (“DC”) public schools—both charter and traditional public schools—operate under a common enrollment lottery system in which any resident can apply to a public school across the district. Included in this lottery are preschool and prekindergarten seats available for 3- and 4-year-olds (DC calls these grades PK3 and PK4, respectively).¹ If parents want a PK3 or PK4 seat, they must apply through the lottery because available seats for schools are guaranteed only at compulsory school age, which in DC is age 5 and begins at kindergarten (District of Columbia Public Schools, 2018). There is often not enough space available for all of the students wishing to enroll in a particular school, and the assignment of lottery numbers is how the district chooses which students are offered seats.

¹ Washington, DC, offers two public programs: PK3 (preschool) for 3-year-old children and PK4 (prekindergarten) for 4-year-old children (District of Columbia Public Schools, 2018). This study uses the term *preschool* throughout to refer to both of these years of schooling.

By giving students random lottery numbers, the system has an allure of fairness. However, important school preferences guide the lottery system. While there are many different school preferences, the following are some common ways students are given priority for traditional public schools: if students reside within the boundary of their traditional school, if they have a sibling already attending the school, and if they live less than a half a mile from the school within walking distance (District of Columbia Public Schools, 2018). Charter schools have preferences as well, but they are not neighborhood or proximity preferences. Parents are told to check lottery preferences by visiting specific school websites (My School DC, n.d.). While families are told to simply rank schools in the order of their preference on their applications (My School DC, 2019), these lottery preferences limit marginalized families' access to good schools and reproduce existing racial and class-based inequalities.

Because of these neighborhood and proximity preferences, the DC lottery must be examined within a broader neighborhood context defined by gentrification, divestment in minoritized areas, and systemic racism. Systemic racism is the “the creation, development, and maintenance of white privilege, economic wealth, and sociopolitical power over centuries” (Feagin & Ducey, 2019, p. 14). Rather than seeing racism through the lens of individual behaviors, systemic racism focuses on the roles and processes that institutions and policies play in reproducing racial inequalities (Feagin & Ducey, 2019; Golash-Boza, 2016). One way that systemic racism is reproduced is through the relationship between neighborhoods, housing, and public schools. As Sharkey (2013, p.

5) noted, “African Americans have been attached to places where...political decisions and social policies have led to severe disinvestment and persistent, rigid segregation.”

Across DC’s eight wards, the district is about 44% Black, 42% White, 5% Asian, 5% some other race, 4% two or more races, and less than 1% American Indian/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (DC Health Matters, 2021). The median household income in the district is about \$91,000, and 59% of residents have a bachelor’s degree or higher (DC Health Matters, 2021). However, Wards 7 and 8 have higher concentrations of Black residents, have lower household income, and have lower educational attainment than the other wards. For example, Wards 1 through 3 are majority White—59%, 69%, and 81%, respectively. On the other hand, Wards 7 and 8 are almost entirely inhabited by Black residents (92% and 92%, respectively). Given that the lottery has school and proximity preferences, where families live impacts their strategies for ranking schools on lottery applications. These preferences create a competitive system that causes anxiety for parents because “demand for high-performing schools in the District far exceeds the supply,” particularly in disinvested neighborhoods (Stein, 2018, para. 3).

Previous studies have shown how housing prices are lower in areas where the schools have higher percentages of non-White student populations (Dougherty et al., 2009). In addition, studies on what parents look for in schools have shown that the racial composition of schools—specifically the numbers of students of color—informs decisions about whether White parents wish to enroll their children in those schools (Posey-Maddox, 2014). In many cities across the United States, these factors are

converging in gentrified environments where neighborhoods are being redeveloped and becoming more White and upper class (Butler, 2021; Hightower & Fraser, 2020). These patterns push students of color and students from low-income families out of neighborhoods and lead to school racial and economic segregation. For example, while Black students made up 15% of the overall U.S. student population in 2018, 82% of Black students attended schools where over half of the students were also students of color (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). This impacts the schools available to Black families. Another study on school choice focused on middle-class African American families and found that these families wanted diverse school settings, but the types of schools they were looking for were rare (Lareau et al., 2021). In addition, these families were distrustful of how schools would treat their racial minority children, which underscores the importance of studying both race and class in school choice decisions (Lareau et al., 2021).

The competition created by the lottery incentivizes privileged parents to use their resources to gain any advantage, however small, to get their children into desired schools. In 2017, the DC school chancellor was accused of giving preference to city officials and other parents, overriding lottery results and helping families get into popular public schools (Jamison & Davis, 2017). It has been reported that higher income parents rely on paid consultants to help them strategize which schools to place on lottery applications (Stein, 2018). The presence of a consultant suggests a more complicated process than simply ranking schools, with the potential existence of a “shadow system of informal rules” that guide families’ processes (Lareau et al., 2016, p. 289).

Education policy researchers focused on school choice have overlooked an important part of these systems: parent strategies to navigate the rules and admission requirements for common enrollment lotteries such as DC's. Focusing on the preschool selection process in a complex lottery system such as DC's sheds light on how families navigate the lottery system and secure coveted and higher quality early childhood education arrangements for their children, which indirectly contribute to educational inequality as children transition to formal schooling.

The current study used cultural capital and community cultural wealth theories to investigate how parents navigated DC's public preschool common enrollment lottery (Bourdieu, 1986; Yosso, 2005). Cultural capital theory is used to explain the mechanisms to maintain socioeconomic power in institutional settings. Lareau and Weininger (2003, p. 597) stated that cultural capital theory "stresses the importance of examining micro-interactional processes whereby individuals' strategic use of knowledge, skills, and competence come into contact with institutionalized standards of evaluation." Studies of school choice have used this theory to examine how middle-class families choose schools (Kimmelberg, 2014; Posey-Maddox, 2014). Parents' and children's race also factors into school choice decisions. Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth theory provides a framework for understanding the role of race in parents' navigation of a school choice lottery system. Specifically, Yosso asserted that the "knowledges of the upper and middle classes are considered capital valuable to a hierarchical society" (p. 70), but she centered race in the debate about the capital that families have. Yosso mentioned two types of capital that are relevant to the current study: social and navigational. She defined social

capital as the resources derived from the larger group and community and navigational capital as the type of capital used to navigate social institutions, particularly “the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind” (p. 80). These capitals overlap with Bourdieu’s social and cultural capital, emphasizing the importance of social networks and proficiency in navigating institutions, but center this topic on race instead of social class to show how people of color and marginalized communities navigate racist systems.

Other research has examined how families navigated the complex rules surrounding a school choice system for kindergarten and how information on enrollment policies and decisions was often unclear (Lareau et al., 2016; Roda & Wells, 2013). However, no study to date has centered these decisions in the context of school choice lotteries specifically and how lotteries shape parents’ preschool decisions. To do so, the present study connects the early care and education (ECE) decision-making literature with the school choice literature. The ECE literature informs what parents are looking for regarding preschool for their children, focusing on preferences, opportunities, constraints, and barriers to preschool selection, and then moves on to discuss how the broader K–12 school choice literature informs preschool choice. No study to date has explored processes for selecting preschool arrangements through a lottery. As such, this study contributes to both the preschool decision-making and larger school choice literature.

DC implemented the current lottery system in the 2014–15 school year, requiring parents to rank up to 12 schools on a common enrollment application. The common enrollment application was designed to standardize school choice enrollment for families

in school choice systems (Gross et al., 2015). Families submit one application listing the schools to which they want to apply without having to worry about different admission requirements. An algorithm then matches students to schools, and in cases where schools are oversubscribed, the system gives families a random lottery number that places them on a waitlist (Toch, 2019). This type of school choice system is unique; Denver and New Orleans are the other cities that have adopted such common enrollment systems (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2014). For comparison, other school choice systems have had arrangements where there are different rules and admission policies for each individual school (see, e.g., Lareau et al., 2016).

In theory, the common enrollment application makes it easier for families because they do not have to learn about rules and deadlines for each school they are interested in; it also allows schools to efficiently know whether families have elected to enroll children in other schools (Stein, 2018). The process is all managed by the My School DC public lottery website, and the advice given to parents in one of its online videos is straightforward: “List schools in the order you like them” (My School DC, 2019).

Changes in preschool access and school choice have created ample educational options for families as many cities, such as New York and DC, are also increasing funding to public preschool (Doggett & Wat, 2019). At the same time, school choice options have increased over time in primary and secondary education (Goyette & Lareau, 2014; Wang et al., 2019). However, these changes put pressure on families to be informed about those choices, and some families may be better suited to make the time

investment needed to stay informed about the choices available. Still, the processes by which parents make preschool choices are not well understood (Forry, Tout, et al., 2013).

No studies to date have investigated how parents navigate these common enrollment lotteries in the preschool years or otherwise. Lareau et al. (2016) conducted an ethnographic study of middle-class parents applying for kindergarten in a district of choice (but without a common enrollment lottery). Despite these parents' relatively higher status and ability to devote more resources to researching schools, they were confused by what each school required for admission: "None of the schools, however, provided the information parents most wanted: the criteria for admission, the best strategies for securing admission, and the likelihood of their children being admitted" (Lareau et al., 2016, p. 285). Some parents were confused about how to list their preferences for kindergarten programs, although other parents were more savvy, understanding that some schools placed priority on early applications (Lareau et al., 2016). Part of this confusion may have been due to the way children were admitted in schools: A lottery decided who received admission into oversubscribed charter schools, but district and school officials decided who received admission to regular public and private schools (Lareau et al., 2016). In Lareau and colleagues' study, parents had to research the schools they wanted, but they also had to track the different criteria for applying across sectors.

A recent report analyzed public preschool lottery data in DC more closely and found that match rates were higher for PK3 and that students from more advantaged homes tended to be waitlisted more frequently (Greenberg et al., 2020). The finding that

students from advantaged homes are waitlisted more frequently suggests that the lottery minimizes the influence of factors such as race and socioeconomic status that often perpetuates educational inequalities. However, these descriptive findings do not provide information about processes related to how parents navigate this lottery system and the role of race in these processes.

Cultural capital and community cultural wealth theories together can illustrate how different types of family privilege intersect to perpetuate educational inequalities (Letiecq, 2019). As such, the following research questions guide this study:

How did parents living in Washington, DC, navigate the preschool lottery system during the COVID-19 pandemic? Specifically:

1. What were parents looking for in preschools for their children? How did they use different types of information to evaluate preschools at the beginning of the lottery process?
2. How did parents choose which preschools to place on their lottery applications?
3. How did parents navigate their lottery results amid the COVID-19 pandemic?

The findings from the present study are significant across research, theory, and practice. First, the study bridges the ECE decision-making literature with the school choice literature. Navigating a preschool lottery is a complex process that involves parent preferences weighed against constraints that inform which schools are listed on preschool lottery applications. Second, this study uses theories of capital to better explain the intersection of race and social class in educational inequality to show “how social-

cultural norms and mores persist to explain and justify why some families have and some have not” (Letiecq, 2019, p. 399). Cultural capital explains how families use information and knowledge to navigate complex institutional settings with opaque rules, while navigational capital helps to increase understanding of how families of color use information and knowledge to navigate racist systems. DC’s common enrollment lottery system is an ideal setting to research how families use information to identify preferred schools for their young children, and this study sheds light on the interplay between race and class in this process. In doing so, the study demonstrates the shortcomings of school choice common enrollment lotteries and who has the power to choose their schools in these systems.

Finally, in practice, this study shows how and what information is used to navigate these school choice lottery environments. One nationally representative report of children younger than 5 years old found that more than half of parents reported relying on their friends when selecting their children’s ECE arrangements (Iruka & Carver, 2006). DC offers a website that provides a wealth of data about schools: waitlists from prior years, school demographic data, and assessment score data and DC STAR ratings. However, this study examined the extent to which information from other parents still plays a vital role in learning about schools in light of this available information.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Nationally, in the 2019–20 academic year, 34% of 4-year-olds and 6% of 3-year-olds were enrolled in state-funded preschool (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2021). Four states (Florida, Oklahoma, Vermont, and Wisconsin) served over 70% of 4-year-olds in state-funded preschool in the 2019–20 academic year, but Washington, DC, enrolled the most students, with 84% of 4-year-olds and 73% of 3-year-olds in state-funded preschool (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2021). DC is a unique context in which to study preschool choice, school lotteries, and how parents navigate these systems because it offers citywide school choice in addition to preschool. Preschool is open to families who are residents of DC regardless of income. However, if families want to enroll their children in a public preschool program, they must do so through the My School DC public school lottery.

Error! Reference source not found. shows the conceptual framework for organizing the literature for this study. The following literature review frames these issues of preschool choice and common enrollment lottery systems around information, social networks, and how families navigate these complex systems, describing the different contexts in which these issues have been explored. Specifically, the next section discusses the resources that families have through cultural, navigational, and social capital as they make early care and education (ECE) decisions for their children. Cultural

capital and community cultural wealth theories are used, which focus on information and navigating complex institutions such as schools. A review of parent decision making in ECE follows the section on community cultural wealth and cultural and social capital. The parent decision making in ECE section is organized around specific family preferences that the literature has identified that families desire when searching for ECE. After discussing what parents are looking for in ECE, neighborhood segregation and gentrification as well as school choice lotteries are discussed before describing DC's common enrollment lottery system more specifically.

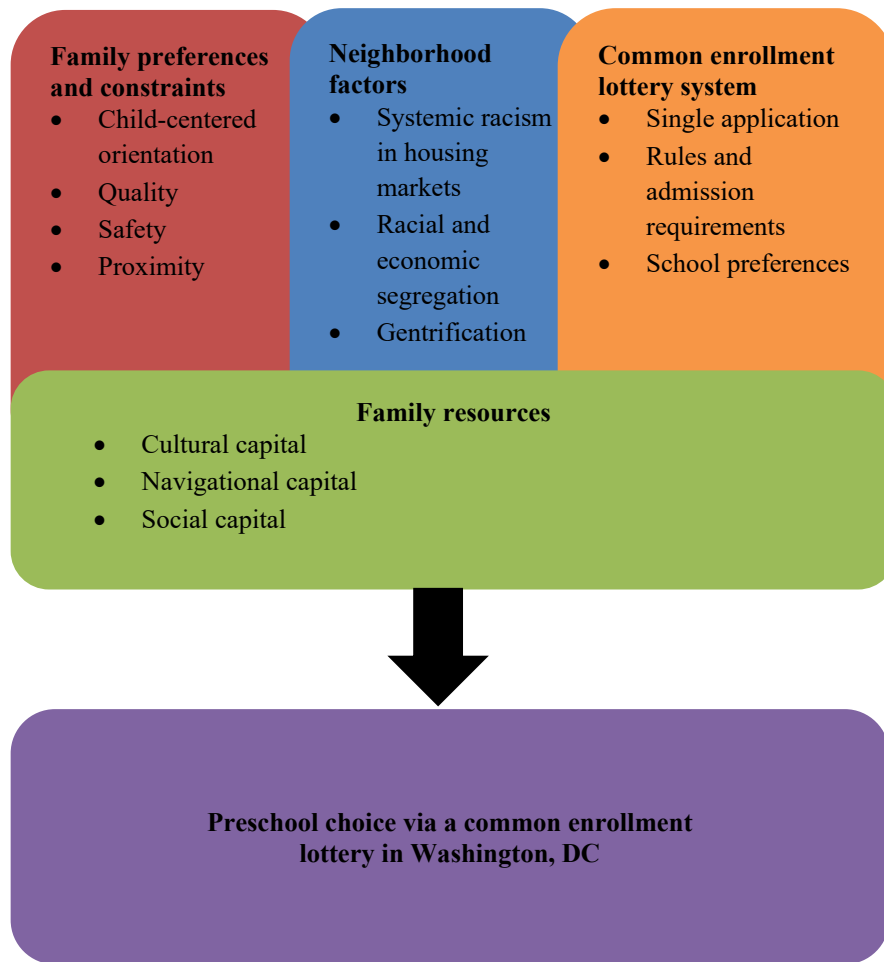


Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for the Study of Preschool Choice in Washington, DC

Cultural Capital and Community Cultural Wealth: Understanding How Preschool Lottery Information Is Passed

This section identifies different sources of capital that parents use to navigate ECE decisions within school choice systems. Cultural, navigational, and social capital are

discussed as important tools for understanding parents' processes in navigating a preschool lottery. These choices take place in contexts constrained by structures such as neighborhood segregation, systemic racism, and education policies that "are anchored in macro relations of opportunity hoarding, domination, and exploitation" (Wright, 2008, p. 348). As such, school choice policies that create the rules around how parents navigate these choice systems can be structures of opportunity hoarding that reproduce existing economic and racial inequalities in schools by limiting who is able to enroll (Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020).

This section connects two complementary theories that illustrate how information and social networks are important resources, or capital, that parents can use to navigate school choice systems. Cultural capital and community cultural wealth theory propose that families' abilities to navigate these systems vary by social class position and race (Bourdieu, 1986; Yosso, 2005). Better understanding about how parents use their own resources to choose preschools for their children in urban areas within these different policy contexts is needed.

Navigating Institutions: Cultural and Navigational Capital

Bourdieu (1986, 1987) argued that inequality is reproduced via cultural and social capital. While early cultural capital research focused on participation in cultural activities such as going to plays, museums, art shows, or classical concerts (see, e.g., Dimaggio, 1982; Dimaggio & Mohr, 1985), recent U.S. scholarship has incorporated Bourdieu's work in explaining how social class reproduces educational inequalities through information and knowledge. Lareau and Weininger (2003, p. 597) argued that cultural

capital “stresses the importance of examining micro-interactional processes whereby individuals’ strategic use of knowledge, skills, and competence come into contact with institutionalized standards of evaluation.” Weininger (2005, p. 87) offered a more precise definition of cultural capital: “The notion of cultural capital merely refers to a culturally specific ‘competence,’ albeit one which is unequally distributed and which is efficacious—as a ‘resource’ or ‘power’—in a particular social setting.” Cultural capital can be summarized as information and knowledge that families use to navigate complex educational systems that are unequally distributed, but it benefits families who have the time and resources to invest in it, and it is particularly helpful for parents as they navigate “shadow system[s] of informal rules” that reproduce structural inequality in social systems such as schools (Lareau et al., 2016, p. 289; Bourdieu, 1986), including public preschool systems.

Contemporary cultural capital research has been used to examine how one’s social class position influences how families navigate school choice environments. There is the cultural capital that parents have in the home as it relates to children’s socialization, but there is also the cultural capital that parents use, in the form of prestigious information, to navigate school bureaucracies. Lareau and colleagues (2016, 2021) used cultural capital theory to explain how parents use information to navigate school choice systems. These studies framed school choice decisions around families’ social class, which is commonly operationalized by the educational attainment and occupational autonomy of the parents. Differences by race were found, where White parents did not consider majority Black schools and Black parents were distrustful of racist bias by

school staff (Lareau et al., 2021). Roda and Wells (2013) also used Bourdieu's ideas to examine White upper-middle-class families in a New York City district with a kindergarten lottery. They found that while these parents valued diverse school settings, fear of not being able to pass on their own advantage to their children led them to school choice decisions, such as gifted and talented programs or private schools, that contradicted their preference for diverse schools (Roda & Wells, 2013).

Meanwhile, Kimelberg (2014) looked at middle-class, mostly White mothers' use of their cultural capital in choosing elementary schools in Boston. The mothers in this study placed less emphasis on standardized test scores, because they felt like they could supplement their children's early learning outside of school (i.e., they believed in their own superior knowledge, or cultural capital, about what their children needed in ECE relative to schools). Here cultural capital, operationalized as the parents' ability to teach children important academic skills outside of schools, allowed parents to "prioritize different criteria in their search for an elementary school" (Kimelberg, 2014, p. 223). This led to the belief that kindergarten was not as important as later grades and that whatever shortcomings the local elementary schools had, their own parent engagement could overcome it (Kimelberg, 2014).

Posey-Maddox (2014) used cultural capital theory to understand middle class involvement in urban schools. Middle-class parents in the study tried to obtain a "critical mass" of like-minded families to enroll in the local public school. They wanted similar values and education levels of other professional parents. Race was also important, as White parents did not want their children to be a minority in the classroom. But they also

wanted diverse settings where their children could develop “cultural competencies they can draw on in future employment and in higher education” (p. 53). This same study showed how the school demographics changed over time to a more White, middle-class demographic, which also changed the nature of how schools norms functioned.

Cultural capital theory demonstrates the ways that social class informs parents’ school choice decisions. Middle- and upper-class parents—through their education, income, and occupations—have access to specific information that is not widely available and that informs what they are looking for in schools. This gives them advantages when there are opaque rules that can be easily manipulated by well-resourced parents (Lareau et al., 2016). However, the theory does not adequately address race. Even studies using cultural capital theory have found that Black middle-class families, despite their class-based resources, are distrustful of whether schools will treat their minority children fairly (Brown, 2021; Lareau et al., 2021). This is the influence that systemic racism has on Black families and families of color more generally, even those with higher social status. This distrust was not present among the White middle-class parents studied by Brown (2021) and Lareau et al. (2021) and is an example of why Blaisdell (2016, p. 252) referred to “schools as racial spaces.”

Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth theory centers race in its conceptualization of various forms of capital. The community cultural wealth framework is proposed to combat systemic racism; it critiques Bourdieu’s work by arguing that research utilizing his theory uses deficit thinking and White middle-class culture as the standard and does not adequately address the resources that families of color have that are

not valued in school settings (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021; Yosso, 2005). Yosso's (2005, p. 77) theory posits that "experiences of People of Color in critical historical context reveals accumulated assets and resources in the histories and lives of Communities of Color," and schools do not always recognize the capital that communities marginalized by society have (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011).

A community cultural wealth framework uses a strengths-based perspective and centers the various kinds of capital that people of color and other marginalized communities bring into educational contexts. This strengths-based perspective is best highlighted in work done by Norma Gonzalez, Luis Moll, Cathy Amanti, and others on students' funds of knowledge (González, 2005; Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011). A funds-of-knowledge approach focuses on marginalized (e.g., working-class, immigrant, racially and culturally diverse) students' lived experiences, making their experience "valid, and classroom practice can build on the familiar knowledge bases that students can manipulate to enhance learning" (González, 2005, p. 43).

Navigational capital is the more distinct form of capital proposed by Yosso (2005) that minority communities possess that pertains to preschool choice. This type of capital is used to navigate social institutions, particularly "the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind" (p. 80). This specific form of capital can align with Lareau and colleagues' (2016) informal rules regarding cultural capital, except navigational capital focuses on minority communities' successful navigation of these systems despite the fact that these systems are often rooted in systemic racism (Yosso, 2005).

Schools are ideal contexts in which to study navigational capital because the vast majority of neighborhoods and schools are economically and racially segregated (Krysan et al., 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). For example, Vesely et al. (2013) examined how low-income first-generation immigrants in Washington, DC, used their children's ECE programs to build social and navigational capital. Mothers in this study, through the ECE programs, built mutually beneficial relationships whereby they helped each other gain employment and helped address language barriers in communicating with ECE teachers. Mothers built navigational capital from these social relationships. For example, they learned from the ECE teachers about transitions to kindergarten for their children. They also learned about the DC school lottery, and ECE staff helped facilitate school visits to prepare for the transition into kindergarten.

In another study, Ansari et al. (2020) used focus group data from lower income Latiné immigrant mothers on what they were looking for in ECE settings. Focus groups were composed of parents whose children attended the same preschool program. Parents indicated in their selection of ECE the importance of "the school's capacity for developing parents' navigational capital" (p. 42). The parents in the study appreciated how the program taught them how to support their children's reading at home and how the program fostered family engagement and helped them better understand what children needed in later schooling.

Social Resources: Social Capital

Bourdieu also discussed how social capital contributes to unequal outcomes for children. Social capital includes the benefits and resources derived from the inclusion of a

larger social group, which is a “collectively-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249). Bourdieu’s idea of social capital is different from other social scientists who also study this concept. For example, Coleman (1988) argued that social capital is the resources derived from shared expectations and norms that parents derive from their networks and relationships with others. This emphasis on shared values adheres more to a rational choice framework, whereas Bourdieu’s theory focuses on power dynamics that Coleman ignored (Christoforou, 2014). Putnam (2000) conceptualized these differences as subtypes of social capital: Bridging capital is a type of social capital that includes others that may be different, while bonding capital is exclusionary.

Similar to Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1986), Yosso (2005) identified social capital as resources derived from group membership and the larger community and highlighted how minority communities have a history of drawing on their families and social contacts for information. For example, in *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*, Valenzuela (1999) examined immigrant students in one California high school and described how students did not think that the teachers cared, so students found support from friends and families to help them academically. Meanwhile, some have found that middle- and upper class parents are more likely to have professionals in their networks and speak with other parents, while working-class parents are more likely to have relatives in their networks, which can be limiting in educational settings where unclear rules and procedures are often heard about informally (Horvat et al., 2003). One nationally representative report of children younger than 5 years old

found that over half of parents reported relying on their friends when selecting their children's ECE arrangements (Iruka & Carver, 2006). Middle-class parents may have important knowledge about preschool programs that they can share with other parents, particularly about how to find and get a better understanding of the preschool enrollment process. However, as Vesely et al. (2013) found, social capital was used as a resource for immigrant mothers whose children were participating in an ECE program where mothers could share information about transportation and schooling.

In summary, cultural and navigational capital help to increase understanding of the ways social class status and race shape how families can use their knowledge of schools to identify shadow systems of informal rules and how families of color navigate racist systems. Both cultural capital and community cultural wealth theories use language about capital to explain resources that families possess and have overlapping concepts. The meaning of cultural capital, with its emphasis on “strategic use of knowledge, skills, and competence [that] come into contact with institutionalized standards of evaluation” (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 597), overlaps with Yosso's (2005) navigational capital and the ability of families to navigate social institutions. Social capital, meanwhile, refers to the benefits of being a member of a larger social group.

Because of the increase in school choice options, the expansion of universal preschool in some locales, and the lack of research on families' preschool decision making in the context of a common enrollment lottery system, this study examined the experiences of families in Washington, DC, which offers both school choice and near-

universal preschool.² Little is known about the influences that preschool and school choice policies have on preschool decision-making processes and how families navigate these situations in DC and elsewhere. The concepts of differing forms and quantities of capital (i.e., cultural, navigational, and social) gives researchers the opportunity to better understand how families navigate these systems. Parents who are better able to navigate and understand the rules around preschool lotteries may provide their children with better educational opportunities. As such, it is important to look at how families use their capital to navigate their respective contexts in order to find suitable preschool arrangements. However, systemic racism continues to impact how families of color must navigate these systems.

Parent Decision Making in Early Care and Education

Child care and preschool decision making, or how families choose early care and education, is a nuanced and complicated process whereby families must weigh a multitude of factors that span family background characteristics, the social context in which families live, parents' and families' beliefs, and the ECE arrangements available (Weber, 2011).³ Parent values, preferences, opportunities, constraints, and barriers shape which preschool programs parents wish to choose on their lottery applications. The social context of the family, including family background characteristics (e.g., education, age of

² Near-universal is used here since not everyone participates in PK3 or PK4 programs.

³ Prekindergarten is a specific type of early care and education (ECE) setting that is part of child care, early childhood education, nonparental care arrangements, and center care. In the sections below, studies of child care and ECE settings are discussed together. This is because *child care* is a broad term that includes relative, nonrelative, and center care arrangements for children whose ages range from birth through about 5, when most children enter formal schooling (Huston et al., 2002). This paper uses ECE throughout when discussing these various arrangements.

child) and community characteristics (e.g., availability of preschool programs, neighborhood change) inform preferences for children's ECE arrangements, which further influences the opportunities, constraints, barriers, and, ultimately, the education arrangement selected (Weber, 2011). However, as the literature on K–12 school choice has noted, racial and economic segregation in neighborhoods and lottery rules also guide decision making.

The ECE decision-making literature focuses largely on the complexity and difficulties that families from low-income backgrounds face when finding ECE arrangements for their children. For example, research has found that families from low-income backgrounds often had fewer options available to them, they made ECE decisions more quickly, and they made these decisions often without considering external sources (Forry, Tout, et al., 2013; Forry et al., 2014). A recent study of Latinè families from low-income backgrounds showed that they were less likely than White families to consider more than one ECE provider (Mendez & Crosby, 2018). Community characteristics also play an important part of this decision-making process, as the cost of ECE, the location of programs, and parental employment have all been shown to inform ECE selection (Davis & Connelly, 2005).

Weber's (2011) model illustrates the specific contextual factors that inform ECE decision making. This model illustrates how ECE is a “consumption choice” in which families are choosing particular arrangements based on their preferences, but this choice is also an “accommodation” in that “parents make child care choices that accommodate their dual roles as providers and caregivers” (Meyers & Jordan, 2006, p. 64). Meyers and

Jordan (2006) argued that this tension between what parents want and the particular constraints placed on them (e.g., family work situations, additional children to consider) means that families' final selection may not always be their most preferred.

This study is a unique opportunity to examine how parents navigated a preschool lottery embedded within the larger K–12 school system. Research has shown public policies geared toward helping low-income families afford ECE arrangements are needed (Chaudry, 2017; Hirshberg et al., 2005; Huston et al., 2002). DC has free, publicly available ECE for 3- and 4-year-olds (i.e., preschool programs). Therefore, the focus shifts to preferences for ECE in a context where ECE is part of the larger school choice system. No study to date has examined ECE in this environment.

Parent Beliefs and Preferences

Gamble et al. (2009) identified five beliefs that a sample of parents (mostly White mothers in the Southwestern United States who were married or partnered and who had attended at least some college) held regarding ECE: (1) child-centered orientation, (2) school readiness, (3) institutional structure, (4) curriculum options, and (5) scheduling. Child-centered orientation was explained as parents wanting their child to have the “freedom to explore and encourage confidence and curiosity”; school readiness was based on items that captured the support of developing social and academic skills to prepare the child for school; institutional structure included structural features such as student-to-teacher ratios and languages spoken; curriculum options included the subjects taught, such as science, music, and art; and scheduling included hours of operation and scheduling in the classroom (Gamble et al., 2009, p. 77). Previous research has shown the

desire for child-centered instruction. Garavuso (2006) conducted a qualitative study that examined three women's attitudes about their children's ECE settings, and the mothers who participated rejected “teacher-driven, drill and skill settings that were poorly supervised” (p. 520).

School readiness, institutional structure, and curriculum options tap into various elements of quality, and parents may perceive definitions of quality differently. Quality in ECE is two-pronged and includes structural features of the arrangement (e.g., child-to-teacher ratios, teacher education) and process aspects of quality (e.g., caregiver warmth, activities in the classroom; Forry, Tout, et al., 2013). However, previous research has shown that parents are not always good evaluators of quality, and they can overrate quality features when compared to ratings of trained observers (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997). Meanwhile, Mocan (2007) examined parent ratings of quality against independent observers’ ratings of quality in infant and toddler and preschool classrooms in California, Colorado, Connecticut, and North Carolina. The findings from this study supported the findings from Cryer and Burchinal (1997) that parents, regardless of education level, are not informed consumers of ECE quality and often cannot identify quality aspects in ECE settings. However, ECE programs comprising children whose parents are more educated tend to also be higher quality as rated by trained observers (Torquati et al., 2011). Bassok et al. (2018) looked at the relationship between parent satisfaction of ECE settings and actual structural (e.g., child-to-teacher ratios, teacher education) and process dimensions of quality (e.g., caregiver warmth, activities in the classroom) among a sample of families from low-income backgrounds in Louisiana. Overall, few findings focused on the

relationship between structural and process dimensions of quality and what parents liked about the characteristics of their child's arrangement.

As children get older (i.e., ages 3–5), their families prefer center-based ECE arrangements, such as preschool programs, over other arrangements such as informal family, friend, and neighbor care (Coley et al., 2014; Davis & Connelly, 2005). Several studies have explored the specific factors that parents consider when choosing their children's arrangements, including reliability of the arrangements, learning activities, location of the arrangement, safety, and caregiver characteristics. A recent report published by the National Center for Education Statistics found that the two most common factors cited by parents in choosing care among children 3 to 5 years old were the reliability of the arrangement and learning activities (Corcoran & Steinley, 2017).

Van Horn et al. (2001) focused on the factors that low-income mothers said was important when selecting their children's ECE and how these factors vary by child, family, and contextual characteristics. The results showed about 90% of mothers said that learning was an important factor on the checklist and about 85% of mothers said that the location of the arrangement was also important. Other factors mentioned in the study were aspects of the arrangement (e.g., how clean it was), the safety of the arrangement, how other children were cared for, and caregiver characteristics, such as aptitude (Van Horn et al., 2001).

Kim and Fram (2009) examined underlying traits of parents based on the factors that they weighed when choosing ECE arrangements from a nationally representative data set with families from all incomes. The study suggested that lower income families

might be more burdened in choosing ECE arrangements than higher income families because they not only had to look for educational aspects of settings, but they also needed to weigh costs and reliability, which were particular to their circumstances. Marital status also informs the factors that parents weigh when selecting ECE arrangements. Another study examined family structure and parent education, and factors families focused on. Leslie et al. (2000) found that single mothers were more likely to emphasize cost, while mothers who were married were more likely to focus on student-to-teacher ratios. This finding was particularly true for more educated families, which, similar to Kim and Fram's findings, suggests that single parents with less education are more burdened in choosing ECE arrangements based on their specific circumstances.

Opportunities, Constraints, and Barriers

Parents' ECE decisions do not perfectly reflect parents' preferences. Rather, these decisions are also shaped by contextual opportunities, constraints, and barriers (Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012). Sandstrom and Chaudry (2012) examined the experiences of families from low-income backgrounds and found that parents looked for quality learning environments for their children with caring teachers as well as the location of the arrangement and the flexibility of the arrangement. When asked what factors informed their final decisions, some of families' initial preferences were minimized. For example, "logistical considerations such as the convenience of the care location, transportation, the cost of care, and the availability of the provider were driving factors for many families' decisions, due to the constraints they faced" (p. 111). Another study of families from low-income backgrounds that explored ideal program characteristics and priorities found

that parents spoke about their preferred components of quality (e.g., safety, the care providers' qualifications, academic skill development), but practical considerations such as cost and the hours of the program were stated in the more private written exercise (Forry, Simkin, et al., 2013).

Time available to research options can also serve as a barrier. Forry et al. (2014) examined the factors that families from low-income backgrounds consider when making ECE choices from a sample of Minnesota families who were receiving Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF). Through latent profile analysis, two main groups of parents were identified: quick deciders (82% of the sample) and time takers (18%). Quick deciders had less education and were more likely to emphasize convenience of the ECE arrangement, but both groups put less weight on cost and put a lot of consideration into quality.

Less is understood about the differences in factors between lower and higher income families. Peyton et al. (2001) focused on the constraints that mothers considered when choosing ECE for their 3-year-old children. The lower income families' choices were often constrained by logistical considerations (e.g., cost, location), whereas higher income families, given their situatedness, were often able to access a full set of choices related to quality considerations. Indeed, families that chose care based on practical considerations were in lower quality ECE settings. These differences between low- and high-income families could reflect the differences between preferences and deciding factors related to barriers and constraints that others found (Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012).

Other studies have also shown similar results by parent education. Kensinger Rose and Elicker (2008) found that mothers who had less than a high school degree stated that the flexibility of arrangements were more important than did mothers who had a college degree or above, and mothers with a high school degree said that an academic curriculum was more important than did mothers with a graduate degree. Finally, mothers with graduate degrees were more likely to prioritize play-based learning than mothers with a college degree, though others have found some parents view play and learning as separate (Kane, 2016).

The existing literature on ECE decision making describes a complex process in which families consider their own preferences and values against the availability of arrangements. Preferences are shaped by important background characteristics, such as income and education. While some of this literature is focused on lower income families, the literature illustrates differences in decision-making processes related to barriers, constraints, and facilitators. The DC preschool common enrollment lottery system introduces an additional layer of barriers, constraints, and facilitators. For example, while families do not have to pay for PK3 and PK4 programs, the lottery adds a potential constraint in that families need to navigate the lottery system as part of the decision-making process. Neighborhoods and where one lives relative to schools can also be factors in the decision-making process, as are the specific preferences that parents have for schools. The next section summarizes the literature on K–12 school choice more broadly, particularly in urban contexts.

How K–12 School Choice Informs Preschool Choice

As policymakers have sought ways to expand access to quality ECE settings, there has also been a shift in urban education reform to offer parents school choice options beyond their traditional K–12 public neighborhood schools. School choice is parents’ ability to choose a school outside of their traditional neighborhood school, such as through private schools, public charter schools, or magnet schools (Goyette & Lareau, 2014). Research stemming from this shift has focused on K–12 schooling likely because these grades are most served by schools. While moving to a choice system opens potential opportunities for families, it also introduces some of the complexities identified in Weber's (2011) ECE decision-making model where contextual factors and preferences lead to opportunities, barriers, and constraints.

Neighborhoods and Gentrification

The vast majority of Americans live in racially and economically segregated neighborhoods (Krysan et al., 2014). Neighborhood segregation is due to a number of factors: economic inequality, racism in the housing market, and preferences for where people live (for a detailed discussion, see Krysan et al., 2014). Previous research has shown that Black and Latinè individuals suffer from racial discrimination in the rental and buying markets through agents not showing prospective applicants all available units or directing them to other less desirable homes or units (Ross & Turner, 2005). Beyond these microlevel interactions, macrolevel issues like laws and lending practices have also supported neighborhood segregation. Rothwell and Massey (2009) pointed out that zoning laws precluding high-density housing lead to unaffordable housing for families from low-income backgrounds and families without significant depth of wealth, which

are circumstances more often experienced by families of color (Shapiro, 2004). Zoning laws also prevent others from accessing important resources in these areas, like schools, which facilitate economic opportunity (Reeves, 2017). Meanwhile, Hillier's (2005, p. 42) historical analysis of mortgage lending in Philadelphia shows the areas populated by higher densities of Black residents had “fewer choices in the type of lender and paid higher interest rates for their loans.”

These findings represent systemic racism in residential housing markets that can explain the reasons for segregated neighborhoods. For example, Black and Latinè individuals are more likely than White individuals to live in disinvested communities characterized by high poverty, less access to quality formal education, and less access to home ownership (Krysan et al., 2014). A recent study indicated this is directly related to the structures of historical lending policies from the New Deal era that deemed neighborhoods inhabited by people of color as less desirable (Faber, 2020). These practices by the Home Owners Loan Corporation not only resulted in racially segregated neighborhoods, but created a wealth gap that exists today (Faber, 2020). While neighborhood segregation cuts across class and race, Pattillo (2005) showed that even Black middle-class individuals live in poorer neighborhoods than their White counterparts. This is likely also due to historical wealth gaps and realtors steering Black middle-class homebuyers away from White neighborhoods (Pattillo, 2005). In addition, others have shown that housing prices are lower in areas where the schools have higher percentages of non-White student populations (Dougherty et al., 2009).

In U.S. cities, housing and redevelopment are central factors in shaping the educational choices of families. School choice policies, particularly in urban contexts, have been utilized to attract middle-class, often White, families in cities (Diem et al., 2019). Such policies in urban settings have also taken place in gentrified contexts where the “process of neighborhood and municipal change [is] driven by capital investments and the movement of middle- and upper-income residents into previously disinvested communities” (Butler, 2021, p. 256). These areas undergoing redevelopment often comprise families of color and families from low-income backgrounds.

Gentrification policies often preclude lower income residents and residents of color from accessing improved services and amenities that gentrification is supposed to offer. Hightower and Fraser (2020) showed that low-income households and communities of color benefit little from the sales of their homes when sold in gentrifying areas because of a lack of information about what homes are worth, rising property taxes, the need for money, and deception by local buyers. Developers are key to the redevelopment process, buying large pieces of land and building new homes all at once for wealthier and Whiter residents; a process Hightower and Fraser called “reverse blockbusting” (p. 239). These factors further reproduce the effects of neighborhood segregation. Others have shown that homeowners of color often sold homes in gentrified areas and relocated to other segregated areas farther away from cities (Glick, 2008).

This relationship between housing and schooling perpetuates economic and educational inequalities. One study investigated gentrification in Chicago and found that the benefits of gentrification did not extend to student learning—there was no increase in

student assessment scores for students attending schools in gentrifying areas (Keels et al., 2013). Lack of educational benefits could be explained by families in gentrifying neighborhoods choosing to enroll their children outside of their local neighborhood schools (Candipan, 2020). If so, this would suggest the need to evaluate the processes through which parents choose schools in these environments.

Rucks-Ahidiana (2021, p. 2) challenged the class-based definitions of gentrification that focus largely on neighborhood changes based on resident education and income and argued that gentrification is also “a process by which profits accumulate in low-income neighborhoods through development and homeownership that varies in presence and degree by how the broader neighborhood is racialized.” The process of attracting middle- and upper class White families into redeveloped urban areas is one example of how neighborhood redevelopment, and neighborhoods more generally, reproduces systemic inequalities centered on race and class (Hightower & Fraser, 2020). Anderson and Sternberg (2013) examined a neighborhood undergoing gentrification in Chicago led by the Black middle class, but the perceptions of White residents in the area were still anchored in poverty and crime. In a qualitative study of lower income Black families choosing schools in Chicago, Pattillo (2015) described how little choice there was for these families: The best high schools had standardized test score requirements, and parents did not “control the admissions criteria that various schools set” (p. 56). In other words, these broader sociopolitical forces that shape urban education are informed by the class and racial characteristics of neighborhoods (Rucks-Ahidiana, 2021).

The consequences of segregation are severe for low-income families and families of color and extend beyond housing. These inequities are maintained across generations, meaning that growing up in neighborhoods that lack vital resources for health, well-being, and schooling continue to have negative effects on the life chances of later generations (Sharkey, 2013). Trends in local housing segregation are carried over to schools since the majority of students (69%) attend their traditional public schools (Jargowsky, 2014; Wang et al., 2019). This leaves most of the nation's schools segregated as well. In 2018, 82% of Black students and 81% of Latinè students attended public schools where over half of the students were non-White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

Choosing Schools in Urban Environments

Families are choosing schools in these urban contexts, and more choices than ever are available to them. In 2016, 56% of public charter schools were in cities, compared to only 25% of traditional public schools (Wang et al., 2019). As parents look for schools, race and class continue to play powerful roles in shaping what parents want and the attitudes toward the schools they are considering. For example, Schneider and Buckley (2002) showed that parents with a college education focused on test scores and school racial composition more than parents with no college degrees, but this study did not report findings by race. More recently, Glazerman and Dotter (2017) examined school preferences among preschool and K–12 applications in DC. Distance from home, academics, and school racial composition were important factors that parents weighed in their ranking of schools in the school lottery application. Specifically, families of

elementary school students looked at proficiency rates of schools, and on average White families looked for schools that were also composed of more White children (Glazer & Dotter, 2017).

The research has been consistent in reporting that White middle-class families consider race when choosing urban schools. One study focused on White middle-class families choosing kindergarten in New York City (Roda & Wells, 2013). While these parents wanted racially diverse school settings for their children, the schools they ultimately applied for were less diverse because parents perceived a lack of racially diverse options in their area. Other studies showed evidence that middle-class White parents may not overtly state that the racial composition of schools was important to them, but they conflated race with other factors, such as school safety, as justification for not liking a school (Evans, 2021). Billingham and Hunt (2016) presented a vignette to White participants and found that independent of test scores, participants were less likely to enroll their children in the fictional school as Black student enrollment increased, even after controlling for other school quality factors such as test scores and school security. Meanwhile, Cucchiara (2013) examined school choice among White middle-class parents at an elementary school using an ethnographic design. In this study, parents perceived sending their children to a public school as a risk. Academics was among the concerns, but parents also admitted that the racial composition of the schools was a worry as well. Specifically, some parents did not want to send their kids to a school where they would be a racial minority.

In another ethnographic study, Posey-Maddox (2014) found that White middle-class families brought greater engagement to their local assigned schools and used their financial resources to provide more services, but this engagement came at a cost. Over time, longstanding norms changed, making the school less diverse and more White (Posey-Maddox, 2014). The Black parents who had been at the school noticed important changes to how the Parent Teacher Association was run after middle-class, mostly White parents became more involved. Collaboration changed from personal interactions and attending events together toward communication through emails and listservs (Posey-Maddox, 2014). In this way, White middle-class privilege and norms were reproduced and minority groups were “othered” (Leticq, 2019; Lewis, 2004).

Brown (2021) conducted a qualitative study with working- and middle-class parents across several racial/ethnic groups and found that middle-class families lived in areas with less poverty than working-class families, and this impacted their considerations for schools. Working-class families focused on school safety and looked for schools outside of their existing neighborhood, while middle-class families looked for schools “that would nurture their children’s individuality and academic interests” (p. 15). These findings align with those from the ECE decision-making literature, which has shown that lower income families must consider more practical factors regarding their children’s education, whereas higher income families can focus on more education-related factors associated with quality (Peyton et al., 2001).

However, regardless of their social class status, families of color experience additional structural burdens regarding their school choice decisions. Brown (2021)

reported concern among Black and Latinè families about sending their children to schools where children of color may not be included and about how schools may limit opportunities for their children based on their race and ethnicity. In such cases, “Black and Latinx mothers invested time and energy in monitoring how schools supported their children’s racial and ethnic identities” (p. 16). This is an important consideration that is not identified as a worry in the literature on White middle-class families, and it may factor into which schools families of color choose. In another study investigating school choice in a large city, Black middle-class families in particular looked for racially diverse schools with “high-achieving middle-class student populations that include both Black peers,” but those schools were rare (Lareau et al., 2021, p. 491). These Black middle-class families

saw predominantly white settings, such as middle-class schools, as entailing serious risks for their children, not only due to the paucity of Black peers, but because of the possibility that their children would be treated unfairly by teachers and administrators. (Lareau et al., 2021, p. 500)

The neighborhood segregation experienced by urban families described above impacts the choices available to them and perpetuates the structural inequality linked to housing. Parents value proximity to schools, and despite school choice policies aiming to decouple housing and schooling, families of color are still more likely to live farther away from higher performing schools (Denice & Gross, 2016). In these ways, the systemic racism that is present in reinforcing neighborhood segregation continues to factor into microlevel decision making in school choice. The literature lays bare how

middle-class families consider the racial composition of schools. However, White parents and parents of color do so in very different ways. White middle-class families avoid schools with high populations of students of color, whereas middle-class families of color seek more racial and economic diversity even though those schools are rarely available. Furthermore, there is unease among families of color that school staff will treat their children unfairly because of their race.

Lareau et al. (2021) is one of the few studies that demonstrated the interplay between individual processes in school choice and neighborhood structural constraints, specific to race and social class. Through interviews with Black middle-class families, specific preferences around diversity were identified, and then using administrative data, school-level characteristics were created to determine how many schools with those preferences existed. However, this study interviewed parents after the decisions were already made and did not uncover the processes by which families made these decisions as they were going through the choice process, how these choices were constrained by neighborhood factors, and what strategies families used in navigating these choice systems.

School Choice Lotteries

Understudied in the school choice literature is the role that rules and admission requirements play in parent decision making. School admission requirements vary greatly across different school choice contexts, and the processes for enrollment can be complex (Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020). For example, in one school choice study, different leaders made admissions decisions for each school sector type: admissions officers for private

schools, lotteries for public charter schools, and district/school personnel for traditional public schools (Lareau et al., 2016). There were also different requirements for each sector, and the process of searching for schools and understanding these different requirements is a time-intensive effort (Brown, 2021; Lareau et al., 2016).

School choice systems can also give students neighborhood or proximity preferences whereby students who live near schools are given a higher likelihood of admittance if schools are oversubscribed (Bonilla-Mejía et al., 2020). However, these types of preferences in a school choice system provide advantages to mostly White middle-class families who live in particular neighborhoods or who have the resources to move if they get poor lottery picks. Offering preferences such as these will benefit households living in proximity to good schools. These contexts where White middle-class parents have most of the power to choose schools is what Sattin-Bajaj and Roda (2020) referred to as opportunity hoarding, and this hoarding reproduces the systemic class and racial inequalities in education.

School choice in urban contexts often relies on school lottery systems because the demand for coveted schools is greater than the availability of open seats for students (Bibler & Billings, 2020). The results of the lotteries can impact parent decisions. A study analyzing school lotteries in North Carolina found that parents of kindergartners who did not get into their preferred schools via the lottery were more likely to move neighborhoods and attend schools with higher test scores the following year. These findings suggest that neighborhood selection still informs school selection even in school choice environments (Bibler & Billings, 2020).

Informational resources (e.g., social networks, school websites, parenting listservs) available can also advantage families who have the time and finances to deepen their understanding of how to navigate school applications. One study found that middle-class families were skilled at using their social networks to seek out coveted school choice kindergarten programs (Lareau, et al., 2016). There was also the complexity of what the schools required for admission, and Lareau et al. (2016, p. 285) explained that “none of the schools, however, provided the information parents most wanted: the criteria for admission, the best strategies for securing admission, and the likelihood of their children being admitted.” Some parents were confused about how to list their preferences for kindergarten programs, although other parents were savvy, understanding that some schools placed priority on early applications. While this study examined parent strategies in a school choice context, individual schools in this study dictated the rules by which parents operated. There was no centralized lottery with preferences. In theory, common enrollment applications and lotteries should reduce this burden for all parents.

One emerging feature that simplifies school choice is when common enrollment lottery systems allow parents to rank schools of choice on a single form across all schools in a district, rather than forcing parents to submit an application form for each school (Gross et al., 2015). Once applications are submitted, families are matched to schools by algorithms that take into account specific school requirements, assigning students to schools based on rank order on the application form, and available seats in schools (Gross et al., 2015). Through this central application form, students are waitlisted and assigned to oversubscribed schools via lotteries (Gross et al., 2015). However, regardless of how

families apply, all school choice systems have deadline requirements that benefit families who have the time and resources to learn the rules; the complexity of navigating school choice systems can result in late registrations that reduce the number of quality schools for families who lack such resources (Fong & Faude, 2018).

Studies have not shown how common enrollment lottery systems, and their preferences and rules, may impact how parents approach school choice decisions. Previous studies have shown that middle-class families expended a significant amount of time in researching schools, and their fear of losing status related to their children's school created anxiety for these families despite their privilege (Roda & Wells, 2013). These families also had access to social networks of other privileged parents that provided information regarding specific schools and rules around the process (Roda & Wells, 2013). However, no studies to date have followed parents through a common enrollment lottery to better understand how lottery rules impact strategies for school choice. This element is important given that prior research showed school choice is a complex process, and common enrollment applications are supposed to reduce this complexity (Gross et al., 2015; Lareau et al., 2016). While previous studies examined school factors that parents looked for in school choice settings, less is known about the actual processes that parents employ when selecting schools and how barriers, constraints, and facilitators shape these decisions.

Context of Current Study

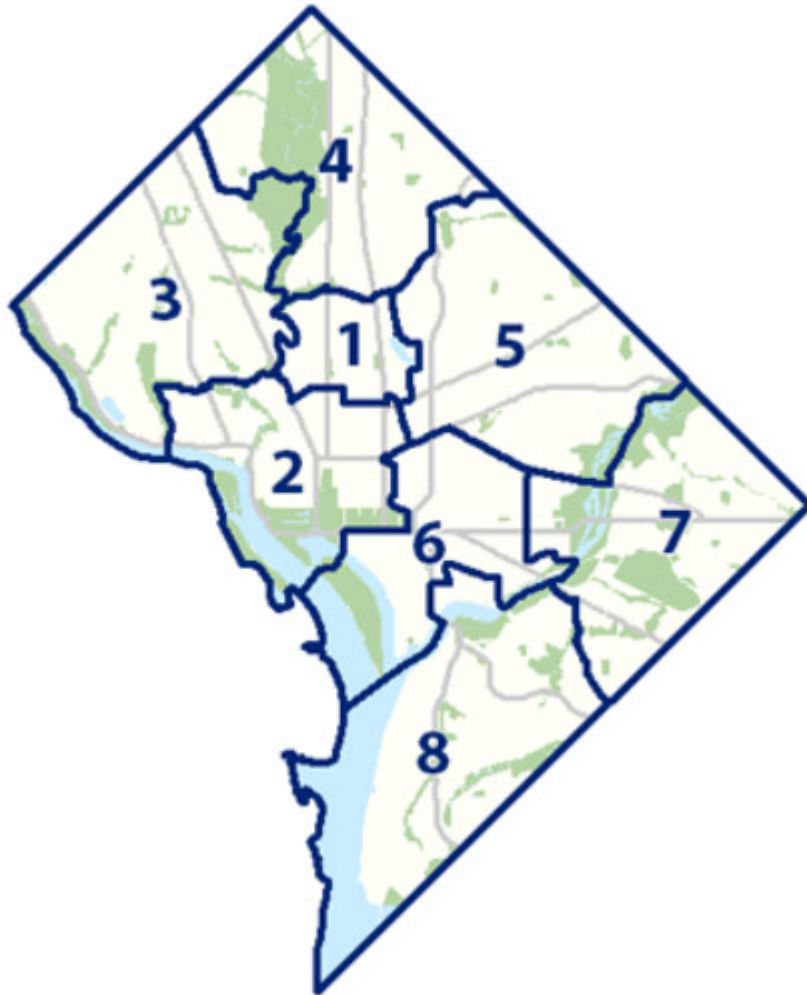
Washington, DC, has experienced an influx of White, higher income residents to the city, particularly in DC's central region, since 2006 (Rabinowitz, 2017). Like other

cities experiencing gentrification, these demographic changes have resulted in redevelopment that leads to the loss of housing for many low-income residents and neighborhoods becoming more White over time (Gringlas, 2017). The impact is also felt during participation in civic activities, where longtime Black residents do not feel their concerns are being considered, nor their voices being heard (Gringlas, 2017).

These changes are felt in schools as well—DC public schools are racially and economically segregated (Coffin, 2018). In particular, Wards 7 and 8 have the least amount of racial diversity and the highest percentage of African American students (Coffin, 2018). While there is more economic diversity in DC schools overall, the least economically diverse schools are in the western parts of the city, which are also areas with the wealthiest and highest concentrations of White residents (Coffin, 2018; Rabinowitz, 2017).

Washington, DC, offers a school choice system whereby residents can enroll their children, beginning in preschool, when children are 3 years old, in schools across neighborhoods in the district. The district is organized across eight wards (see **Figure 2**) and served 94,532 students as of October 2021, with 44,899 of those students in public charter schools and 49,035 in traditional public schools (District of Columbia Public Schools, 2022). School choice is popular across the district, with only 27% of students attending their traditional neighborhood public school and 46% attending a public charter school in the 2016–17 school year (Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, 2017). DC implemented the current lottery system in the 2014–15 school year, requiring parents to rank up to 12 schools on a common enrollment application form (Toch, 2019). Before the

2014–15 school year, if parents wished to enroll their children outside of their traditional neighborhood school, parents had to submit different applications for each traditional public or public charter school to which they wished to apply (Austermuhle, 2019).



Source: <https://planning.dc.gov/whatsmyward>.
Figure 2
Map of DC Wards

As mentioned above, the common enrollment application is designed to standardize school choice enrollment for families in school choice systems (Gross et al., 2015). In theory, submitting a single application for up to 12 schools should be easier than tracking different application deadlines and policies for each individual school. Indeed, the process is presented as straightforward to families, who are told to “list schools in the order you like them” (My School DC, 2019). However, there is an embedded inequality in this process: The number of choices that are available to families can be a benefit if families have the time to invest in researching schools, but it can be challenging for families with lower incomes given the need for access to a computer with internet as well as time to research all of the schools available (Balingit, 2016).

These factors, set in the broader context of a gentrifying city that suffers from historical racial and economic segregation in its neighborhoods and schools, create an ideal context for studying how White and Black middle-class families navigate a preschool lottery. This study focused on the following research questions: How did families living in Washington, DC, navigate the preschool lottery system during the COVID-19 pandemic? Specifically,

1. What were parents looking for in preschools for their children? How did they use different types of information to evaluate preschools at the beginning of the lottery process?
2. How did parents choose which preschools to place on their lottery applications?
3. How did parents navigate their lottery results amid the COVID-19 pandemic?

Chapter Three: Methods

Methodological Approach

I approach this study with the belief that there is an objective reality to be explored. Inequality in all its forms—including those rooted in racism and social class position—operate in the background and influence the opportunities and privilege that families provide for children. These factors often go unnoticed and are brought out by researchers examining these issues. While there is an objective reality to be examined, researchers are limited to that understanding because “what people perceive and believe is shaped by their assumptions and prior experiences as well as by the reality that they interact with” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 43). This ontological perspective is known as critical realism (Hatch, 2002). Racial and economic inequality is real and is more than a construction in people’s minds. However, the ways that people perceive these realities as shaping preschool choice depend on their social context.

These epistemological and ontological stances fall within postpositivism. The epistemological stance of postpositivists is that theory still plays a role in shaping the questions that are asked. However, according to Popper (1965), research findings can never be proven true in an absolute sense (Crotty, 2015). Within the postpositivist paradigm, theory guides the research questions to study and find “truth” of reality, but Popper’s falsification principle states that “scientists are called upon not to prove a theory

(they can never do that) but to try to prove it wrong” (Crotty, 2015, p. 32). Further, postpositivists agree that researchers should stay objective in order to approximate reality as best they can (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). They do this through the separation of researcher values in conducting social science. Researcher and researched are separate, and researcher values and beliefs are removed (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Hatch, 2002). For example, postpositivists believe values and biases are controlled for through rigorous methods and structured interview protocols (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Hatch, 2002).

I acknowledge I enter this study influenced by my prior experiences and beliefs. I have these beliefs based on my own experiences as a first-generation college student who often had to navigate a complex education system and figure things out on my own. For many years, since entering the academy, I have gravitated toward Bourdieu’s theory because his ideas mirrored my experiences—inequality is multidimensional. In my personal case, my mother made a middle-class income but did not necessarily know how to help me navigate the higher educational system (a type of cultural capital for Bourdieu). My mother’s possession of economic capital (a relatively high income) but lower cultural capital (knowledge of the higher education system) meant materially I was well off, but I had to rely on my own experiences (and trial and error) to figure out what I needed to do to be successful in college. However, I am also privileged as a White male, and this privilege means that I have not had to navigate systemic racism or misogyny in social institutions (Yosso, 2005). White privilege has benefitted me in unseen ways since institutions such as schools are but one example of spaces where “Whites are able to reap disproportionate benefits from social organizations and institutions” (Embrick & Moore,

2020, p. 1942). As an adult I have attained my own amount of cultural and economic capital that also brings privilege. I have attained a graduate degree and work at a job that grants me a lot of autonomy, and I also am married with three children.

The epistemological stances of postpositivism directly influence the methods used in the research. Postpositivists' values and biases are controlled for through rigorous methods and more structured interview protocols (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Hatch, 2002). In this study on preschool choice, I employed qualitative methods informed by ethnographic and case study approaches. Ethnography “seeks to describe culture or parts of culture from the point of view of cultural insiders” (Hatch, 2002, p. 21). In this case, this study explored types of capital—social, cultural, and navigational—to look at preschool choice. Ethnography was first utilized by anthropologists, and while other disciplines such as sociology and education have used this design, the “factor that unites all forms of ethnography is its focus on human society and culture” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 29).

While this study was not a pure ethnography, as I was not in the field immersed over an extended period of time, I did conduct open-ended in-depth interviews, meeting with each participant four times over the course of a year. Ethnographically informed methods are a logical choice to study the social networks, the sources of information, and the specific procedural knowledge and strategies that parents utilize in selecting preschools for their children (Lareau et al., 2016, 2021). In addition, others who have examined the influence of social class and race on family life using Bourdieu's theory have used the ethnographic design (Lareau, 2011).

This research is also informed by case study methods that utilized a longitudinal qualitative design. Gerring (2004, p. 342) defines a case study as “an intensive study of a single unit.” Yin (2009, p. 18) adds that case studies are used when researchers want to “understand a real-life phenomenon in depth, but such understanding [is] encompassed [by] important contextual conditions.” Case studies also collect data from many sources to examine a phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2015).

Case studies can be examinations of single cases, but they can also examine a “single case with embedded units” (Baxter & Jack, 2015, p. 550). For example, Hightower and Fraser (2020) used interviews with residents and real estate developers as well as quantitative data on home sales to study how Black neighborhoods have undergone gentrification in Nashville. These types of case studies allow for the analysis of complex processes among subunits of a particular case, where there can be more than one unit of analysis, and a different method is used to examine each unit of analysis (Yin, 2009). As described in Chapter 2, DC parents participating in the common enrollment lottery do so within a complex, hierarchical context—parents, schools, and neighborhoods—that needs to be examined while studying their decisions. **Error! Reference source not found.** describes this context in more detail, where the DC common enrollment lottery is the case and parents, schools, and wards are the embedded subunits.

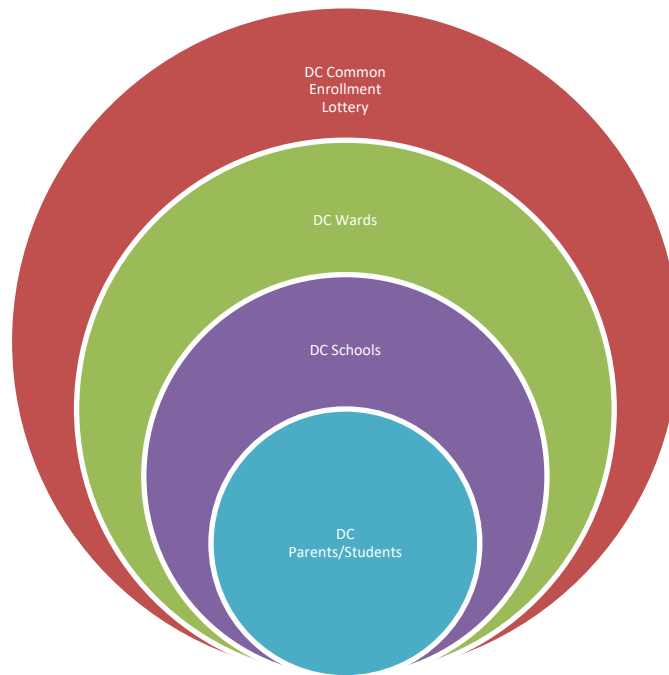


Figure 3
Hierarchical Organization of DC Common Enrollment Lottery

Study Setting

The setting for the current study was Washington, DC, which is an urban school district that offers school choice through a randomized lottery process and preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds. As mentioned in Chapter 2, in the 2019–20 academic year DC enrolled 84% of 4-year-olds and 73% of 3-year-olds in state-funded preschool (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2021). According to the DC public schools website, the law requires students to enroll in kindergarten beginning at age 5.

Overall, the district is about 44% Black, 42% White, 5% Asian, less than 1% American Indian/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, about 5% some

other race, and 4% two or more races (DC Health Matters, 2021). The median household income in the district is about \$91,000, and 59% of residents have a bachelor's degree or higher (DC Health Matters, 2021). Table 1 shows that these characteristics vary considerably across the city's wards. Wards 7 and 8 are economically and racially segregated, with higher concentrations of Black residents, lower household income, and lower educational attainment than the other wards, although the differences are starkest between Wards 7 and 8 and Wards 1 through 3.

For example, Wards 1 through 3 are majority White—59%, 69%, and 81%, respectively. On the other hand, Wards 7 and 8 are almost entirely inhabited by Black residents (91% and 92%, respectively). Wards 7 and 8 are also composed of households with significantly lower income. The median household income for Wards 7 and 8 is \$42,201 and \$39,473, which was about \$50,000 lower than the overall median of \$91,414. Similar discrepancies in advantage are found for educational attainment, with higher percentages of residents possessing a bachelor's degree or higher in Wards 1 through 3 (on average about 80% of residents 25 and older) than residents in Wards 7 and 8 (on average about 19% of residents 25 and older).

Table 1
Percent Race/Ethnicity, Median Household Income, and Educational Attainment, Overall and by Ward: 2021

	Overall	Ward							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Race/ethnicity									
White	42.31	58.50	69.15	81.38	31.25	31.18	49.52	3.08	4.27
Black/African American	43.90	21.21	13.31	5.33	45.87	55.42	38.84	91.74	91.84
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.36	0.43	0.26	0.25	0.51	0.44	0.41	0.29	0.25
Asian	4.48	6.06	9.04	7.51	2.50	3.38	4.96	0.36	0.45
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.07	0.08	0.10	0.05	0.12	0.06	0.08	0.03	0.04
Two or more races	3.53	3.77	3.49	3.52	4.67	3.79	3.66	2.51	2.35
Other	5.35	9.94	4.64	1.96	15.07	5.73	2.53	1.99	0.81
Hispanic, any race	12.23	21.13	12.46	9.77	25.88	11.79	8.44	4.22	3.12
Median household income	91,414	110,339	112,244	143,339	94,163	91,189	113,922	42,201	39,473
Educational attainment ¹									
Less than 9th grade	3.50	5.11	2.32	0.97	6.40	3.83	2.28	3.95	3.40
Some high school, no diploma	4.98	4.77	1.99	1.05	5.32	5.44	4.26	9.34	9.88
High school diploma	16.87	10.04	6.46	3.67	17.66	17.99	12.20	40.35	38.05
Some college, no degree	12.44	7.02	6.45	5.79	15.88	14.87	8.93	22.49	24.45
Associate degree	2.88	1.74	1.48	1.64	3.31	3.21	2.48	5.12	5.35
Bachelor's degree	25.28	30.22	30.55	29.75	22.76	26.17	32.90	10.78	10.26
Master's degree	21.56	27.06	30.48	32.19	18.34	19.12	24.13	6.36	7.19
Professional degree	8.37	9.67	14.04	15.56	6.95	6.52	8.69	0.96	0.95
Doctorate degree	4.11	4.37	6.23	9.38	3.38	2.86	4.12	0.66	0.45

¹Among population 25 and older.
Source: www.dchealthmatters.org.

Table 2 shows the key dates for the 2019–20 school year. In DC, public preschool (i.e., preschool or PK3 for children who are 3 years of age by September 30 and prekindergarten or PK4 for children who are 3 years of age by September 30) is offered through the lottery system because available seats for schools are only guaranteed at compulsory school age, which in DC is age 5 and begins at kindergarten (District of Columbia Public Schools, 2018). However, as noted above, the rates of participation in preschool programs is relatively high in DC, particularly for 4-year-olds. According to the District of Columbia Public School (DCPS) Enrollment and Lottery Handbook, families must complete an enrollment application, and they have the opportunity to list up to 12 schools that they would like to enroll their child in. Applications can be completed online at www.myschooldc.org, or families can call a toll-free hotline and complete the application over the phone (DCPS, 2018). DC has a program called Early Action PreK that guarantees students are given a seat for PK3 or PK4 in specific schools as long as the families are within those schools' boundary, though families must still apply through the My School DC lottery, and they can still apply for other schools.

Table 2*Dates for the 2020–21 School Year*

Date	Event
Saturday, December 14	2019 DC EdFEST
Monday, December 16	My School DC lottery opens
Monday, February 3 (11:59 p.m.)	Application deadline for grades 9–12
Monday, March 2 (11:59 p.m.)	Application deadline for grades PK3–8
Friday, March 27	Lottery results are released, enrollment season opens for school year 2020–21
Saturday, April 25	Enrollment Saturday
Friday, May 1	Lottery enrollment deadline

Source: <http://enrolldcps.dc.gov/Keydates>.

Important school lottery preferences are given to special populations of students that could inform which schools parents list on lottery applications. For example, traditional public schools often give the following preferences: (1) if students reside within the boundary of their traditional school, (2) if they have a sibling already attending the school, and (3) schools that are less than a half a mile within walking distance (DCPS, 2018). Charter schools have preferences as well, but they do not have neighborhood or proximity preferences. Parents are told to check lottery preferences by visiting specific school websites (My School DC, n.d.). After parents submit their application, children are given a random lottery number that is used to select students when they are placed on waiting lists. Families can also complete a postlottery application if they “miss the lottery application deadlines or would like to apply to additional schools” (DCPS, 2018, p. 14).

There is also an application process during the school year for families wishing to change schools during the school year.

Lottery results are communicated to families via email, via mail, and by logging into their My School DC online account. As noted above, families can list up to 12 schools on their application, ranking from first to last their order of preference. If students are not matched with their first choice, they are waitlisted for that school. Once a student is matched to a school, the student is waitlisted for all schools ranked higher than the match school and removed from the lower ranked schools. If there is no match, then the student is waitlisted for all schools. Seats are guaranteed for matched schools if families enroll their child in them by the enrollment deadline. Even if families do not initially get a seat in their matched school that is their first choice, they could still enroll in their highest ranked school and get a seat at a higher school if they are waitlisted. Once a match is made, families need to submit residency requirements and the My School DC paperwork before the enrollment deadline in addition to providing the school with the proper documentation from My School DC.

Study Participants

Consistent with other studies focused on parents and children, in this study mothers were respondents (Tourangeau et al., 2015). Participants were upper-middle-class mothers ($N = 3$) who were navigating the DC preschool lottery during spring 2020 for the 2020–21 school year. In this study social class categories are defined as follows:

The educational requirements of respondents' jobs and the amount of supervision they experience at work. The upper-middle class includes families in which at

least one adult has a full-time job that requires highly complex, educationally certified (advanced degree) skills and provides substantial autonomy in the course of the work. The middle class includes families in which at least one adult works full-time in a job that requires relatively complex, educationally certified skills (a bachelor's degree or above) but that does not provide high levels of autonomy.

(Lareau et al., 2016, p. 282)

The mothers in this study possessed advanced academic credentials and had white-collar jobs. All participants remained employed throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants possessed a significant amount of autonomy in their occupations, as they worked from home and cared for their children due to childcare closures as a result of the pandemic.

The three mothers who participated are further described in **Table 3**. Layla, a Black mother and attorney in a same-sex marriage, was navigating the preschool lottery process for the first time for her only son, who was going into PK3. Layla began in January 2020, looking at schools in proximity to their house and documenting the characteristics they were looking for in a spreadsheet. Sara, a Black mother with two preschool-age boys, had a master's degree and was a program analyst, and she had experience with the lottery process since her older son had just gone through it the year before. Now, she was going through the process of enrolling her younger son in a PK3 program. She never explicitly shared her relationship status, but throughout the interviews Sara never mentioned another parental figure in the household. Evelyn, a White mother with a master's degree who worked in human resources, had one girl who

was entering PK3, so this was Evelyn’s first time going through the lottery. During our interviews Evelyn used pronouns such as *we* to indicate there was another parent or caregiver in the household. Evelyn was fortunate to secure placement in her family’s preferred school right at the beginning. However, by the last interview, Evelyn’s family had played the lottery again because they were considering foster adopting an older child.

Table 3

Key Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

Participant	1st child going through lottery?	Race/ethnicity	Highest level of education	Occupation	Relationship to child
Layla	Yes	Black, non-Hispanic	Professional degree after bachelor’s	Attorney	Mother
Sara	No	Black, non-Hispanic	Master’s degree	Program analyst	Mother
Evelyn	Yes	White, non-Hispanic	Master’s degree	Human resources	Mother

All of the study participants had at least one child who was a rising preschooler. Preschoolers for this study were defined as children between the ages of 2 and 5 years old who were not yet enrolled in kindergarten and were eligible to participate in DC's public PK3 or PK4 programs.⁴ By default, these parents were participating in DC's school lottery system. This is consistent with other studies that have documented that this is the approximate age range of a child for whom parents begin looking for more formal care that emphasizes learning and preparation for school (Chaudry, 2017). Interviews were not conducted with parents of children who were not currently looking for a program via the lottery. This is because parents may not accurately recall all the factors that they considered, and the information that they received, while looking for and selecting their child's preschool.

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, I attended DC EdFEST on December 14, 2019. DC EdFEST is the school fair where residents can meet with staff from all the schools participating in the lottery and ask questions about schools. The event was well attended, and I browsed the different booths and collected several brochures that schools offered. The event was important to attend as it marked the beginning of the school lottery period for parents.

Data collection began with an announcement posted to a local neighborhood listserv in March 2020, followed by four rounds of interviews that took place between

⁴ Two-year-olds are included in the sampling because they may have been eligible to participate in the DC PK3 program by the time the school year began.

March 2020 and March 2021. During each interview, appropriate questions were asked based on mothers' status in the lottery process. For example, the first interview focused on processes for finding schools, while the second interview, which occurred just before the enrollment deadline, focused on mothers' lottery results and processes for making an enrollment decision. The third interview emphasized updates on school enrollment and waitlist status, while the final interview, which occurred 1 year after interviews began, focused on updates from the school year and whether mothers were playing the lottery again. **Table 4** shows the detailed interview schedule and the topics covered. Mothers also completed a short demographic survey after the first interview. In addition, a quantitative data file was created to analyze contextual data (wards, school location, waitlists) parents identified during the interviews. The following sections describe in more detail the data collection procedures.

Table 4*Data Collection Schedule*

Milestone	Start/end date	Lottery deadlines for parents
Listserv announcement is sent out/recruitment begins	Tuesday, March 24, 2020	
Interview 1 schedules. Focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Process of finding schools• Ideal characteristics of preschool• Advice to other parents	March 25–April 4, 2020	March 2, 2020 application deadline for Grades PK3–8
Interview 2 schedules. Focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lottery results• Process for making enrollment decision	June 8–19, 2020	March 27, 2020 lottery results are released June 15, 2020 enrollment deadline (extended due to COVID)
Interview 3 schedules. Focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Updates from school selection and waitlists• Changes over the summer• Enrollment in school• Advice to other parents	September 10–October 2, 2020	September 3, 2020 first day of school for PK3 and PK4 students
Interview 4 schedules. Focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Updates from beginning of school year• Plans for lottery for 2021–22 school year	March 6–19, 2021	March 2021

Recruitment

Participants were recruited to participate in interviews based on purposive sampling criteria using convenience sampling techniques. Recruitment for interviews

began in March 2020 following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix A). Robinson (2014) defined purposive sampling methods as “non-random ways of ensuring that particular categories of cases within a sampling universe are represented in the final sample of a project” (p. 32). Participants were recruited through an advertisement on two local parenting listservs. I had access to one parenting listserv through Kelly,⁵ a colleague with a PhD in a social science field who also lives in Washington, DC, and has research experience in both qualitative and quantitative methods. Kelly, who is a White woman in an opposite-sex marriage, has two young children and had already gone through the DC lottery process.

A listserv advertisement was used (see Appendix B) to elicit participation. As mentioned above, it asked for parents who would be participating in the upcoming school lottery for children between the ages of 2 and 5. Interested parents were asked to email me. Information about the university, the IRB approval number, and the time commitment (i.e., parents were informed they would be asked to participate in three interviews) was also included.

The original IRB submission was approved for this project on March 13, 2020, two days after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic (Katella, 2021). This resulted in relying on listserv announcements and emails for recruitment. The first listserv announcement was posted to a local parenting website on March 23, 2020. This first listserv announcement generated a response from Evelyn.

⁵ Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the identity of study participants.

Snowball sampling was used whereby participating parents were asked for recommendations and referrals for other parents to increase the sample size (Lareau et al., 2016; Robinson, 2014). Evelyn offered to send the announcement to another parenting listserv. Through this method, Layla responded. Sara responded to an announcement I posted in another popular local parenting listserv.

Participants reviewed the consent form (see Appendix C) before each interview. At the beginning of each interview, time was set aside for any questions regarding what was stated on the consent form. On the consent form and during the interviews, participants were informed that their information was confidential and pseudonyms would be used throughout the project. The consent form also stated that once summaries and the final report have been written, the recordings will be deleted. Only I had access to the audio recordings. Participants were asked if they agreed to recorded interviews, and none dissented. The consent form also described that there were no inherent risks or benefits to participation and that participation was voluntary and mothers could withdraw from the study at any time.

In-Depth Interviews

Each mother was interviewed at four time points for a total of 12 interviews. As Hatch (2002) stated, interviews “uncover the meaning structures that participants use to organize their experiences and make sense of their worlds” (p. 91). In this sense, interviews were an ideal form of data collection; they have been used by other researchers who have examined parents’ selection of early childhood education arrangements (Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012).

I used semistructured interviews with a predetermined protocol of questions that all participants were asked. Follow-up probes and other open-ended questions were included in the protocol as well to allow me to tailor the conversation to the responses participants gave to the structured questions asked of everyone. The consistency of the same questions being asked of all participants ensured that the research questions could be adequately answered, but there was flexibility with follow-up probes in case new ideas arose from the interviews.

Most interviews were conducted over the phone, and all were conducted in English, which was the primary language of all the participants. The United States was in lockdown when the first interviews occurred in March 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first interview was with Evelyn, and there were technical issues connecting with Skype, so we conducted the call using FaceTime. In this case, my phone could not also be used as a recorder, so no transcript was recorded for this first interview. Detailed notes were taken and used for the analysis. After the third interview, Evelyn was sent a participant summary that summarized the interview notes. She had no additional comments to make on this document. The first interviews with Layla and Sara took place using Skype and phone, respectively. All remaining interviews took place over the phone, as this seemed to be the preferred method for the participants.

Interviews began with a brief summary of the research. Mothers were told that their participation would increase understanding of the experiences of parents as they navigated the DC lottery system. They were reminded that the interview would be recorded, any information shared would be confidential, and that participation was

voluntary. For the first interviews, mothers were told that the interview would last about 30–60 minutes, while for the remaining interviews, they were told the interviews would last about 30 minutes. It was important that this information was restated before the interviews began so that mothers had the opportunity to ask questions and for me to try to build additional rapport with mothers since the interviews could not take place in person.

To gain rapport with respondents, the first interviews began with a general opening question that asked them to tell me about their child (Hatch, 2002). This led to conversations about whether the child was looking forward to going to school and whether the mothers were ready for the transition. I used this as an opportunity to share my own background, including that I had three children. These conversations were brief yet important to share stories and better understand the mothers. There was small talk like this at the beginning of each interview to catch up on how things were going. This rapport building was important and contributed to retention across the study. Mothers would sometimes send updates without my prompting over the course of the study, which demonstrated their engagement. For example, Evelyn sent me an email when she found out in between meetings that her daughter had gotten into her first choice, and Layla emailed me at the end of the study to share that her son had finally gotten into their preferred school. After this initial opening, I moved on to the main structured questions that addressed the research questions around choice and information. See Appendix D for the interview protocols.

The smaller number of participants followed over the course of a year allowed for more depth in understanding mothers' decision making over time. Moreover, Morse

(1995, p. 148) argued that saturation is more than stopping collection when you are hearing the same things and argued that research stops when there is “enough data to build a comprehensive and convincing theory.” Salient themes emerged across the three participants over the course of the year. Quantitative data, discussed in more detail below, validated the themes that emerged from the interviews with these mothers.

Interviews were recorded on an iPhone in an electronic format and securely stored via a third-party transcription service called Otter AI. This service immediately uploads interview files from an app on an iPhone to a secure website that requires two-factor authentication. During interviews, the app recorded the conversations and automatically transcribed the data shortly after interviews ended. The electronic files were password protected.

Demographic Survey

At the end of the first interview, each mother was asked to complete a short demographic survey (see Appendix E) on the platform SurveyMonkey. Mothers were asked five questions: (1) Is this your first child going through Washington, DC’s public school lottery? (2) Are you Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin? (3) What is your race?⁶ (4) What is your highest level of education?⁷ (5) What is your occupation? (6) How are you related to this child?⁸

⁶ Mothers could mark more than one race. Response options were Asian, Black or African American, White, or other/specify.

⁷ Response options were less than high school; high school diploma or equivalent; some college, but no degree; associate’s degree; bachelor’s degree; master’s degree; or doctorate degree (e.g., PhD, EdD).

⁸ Response options were mother or father (birth, adoptive, step, or foster), aunt or uncle, grandmother or grandfather, parent’s girlfriend/boyfriend/partner, other/specify.

Quantitative Data File

To study schools as an embedded subunit to the DC common enrollment lottery, publicly available quantitative data were obtained. I created a quantitative data set that included public schools with PK3 or PK4 programs in Washington, DC. This data set was used to examine aggregate waitlist data, school demographic data, and school quality scores (through the DC STAR ratings) overall and by each of DC's eight wards. These data were publicly available in two data files.

Waitlist data for each school were provided to parents to view through the DC school lottery website. These data were available for download in Tableau. In Tableau, filters were added for waitlist data for the 2019–20 school year and for schools that offered PK3 or PK4. The 2019–20 school year was chosen because these were the data parents would have looked at as they were going through this lottery process. These data were then exported into Excel, and the file included school name, waitlist length on results day, lottery seats, total waitlist offers made by June, total waitlist offers made by August, and total waitlist offers made by October. A single school campus sometimes had more than one program with waitlist data. For example, this happened if a school offered an English and a Spanish language program. In cases where a single school had more than one program, the data were combined into one. This was because the purpose was to report lottery results at the school level, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to report on data about programs within schools. However, if a school had more than one campus, those schools were reported as different schools. This produced a data file with 137 traditional public and public charter schools with waitlist data.

Because adding additional information about schools was desirable, such as the ward of the school and school demographic information, the 2019 DC School Report Card aggregate data file was downloaded.⁹ The file included a common school identifier, school ward, school type, enrollment data, and DC STAR scores. The DC STAR ratings (STAR stands for School Transparency and Reporting Framework) measure school performance by academic ability, growth, school environment, language proficiency for English learners, and graduation rates (District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, n.d.). Graduation rates are not included in the STAR calculations for elementary schools. These scores are created for all students in the school and for subgroups of students (at-risk students, language learners, students with disabilities, and by racial/ethnic breakdowns) and are summed together to create an overall STAR score for a school (District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, n.d.). The STAR score is then converted to a 5-point rating scale that “provides an overall view of how that school is doing with all students across multiple data points” (District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, n.d., p. 4).

Because the lottery file had no common school identifier, a master file with a common school identifier was created by first matching on school name. That is, school names were used to match the data from the lottery file to the 2019 DC School Report Card aggregate data file. Once school names were matched, the school identifier could be used to merge the lottery file onto the 2019 DC School Report Card aggregate data file

⁹ Downloaded from <https://osse.dc.gov/page/dc-school-report-card-resource-library>.

with ward and DC STAR ratings. Of all the schools that offered a PK3 or PK4 program, only 19 cases were missing DC STAR ratings on the 2019 DC School Report Card aggregate data file that were not on the master lottery file.

In a separate tab, the 2019 DC School Report Card aggregate data file had school information for the percentage of students who were in the following groups:

- American Indian/Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black/African American
- Hispanic/Latino of any race
- Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander
- Two or more races
- White
- Homeless
- At-risk
- English learners

These variables were merged with the lottery file as well using the same method above. The school IDs from both files were used to merge the two files. Only five schools were missing data on school enrollment that were not on the master lottery file.

This data file was replicated by another quantitative data expert to verify that the files were merged successfully. The files were given to the data expert with instructions on how the files were merged. Two excel files were delivered: the lottery waitlist file and the 2019 DC School Report Card Aggregate Public Data that had the school IDs, DC

STAR data, and school demographic data. Example output tables were also provided so that the data expert understood how the data would be reported. Discrepancies replicating the file were minor and were mostly due to minor differences in how the files named schools (e.g., James River Montessori vs. James River Elementary School). There were also six discrepancies in matching the school wards. All wards were correct in my file except for one, which was corrected. School wards for these six cases were verified by confirming addresses on <https://www.myschooldc.org> or <https://planning.dc.gov/whatsmyward>.

Data Analyses

Qualitative Data Analysis

Analytic memos were written to complement the detailed interview data (Saldaña, 2016). The analytic memos captured the broader themes from field observation and were written at times to reflect on the progress of the interviews and to write down initial themes. As Maxwell (2013) noted, “Memos not only capture your analytic thinking about your data, but also *facilitate* such thinking, stimulating analytic insights” (p. 105). Memo writing assisted in identifying major themes, but they also helped me organize my thoughts and consider how the research questions needed to be revised. Field notes were also taken at times, particularly after interviews on the protocols that were printed out to describe the conversations I had with participants and my initial thoughts on the emergent themes from the conversation. These memos were informal notes that were saved to reflect on as I transcribed the data and worked on coding schemes.

Once the interviews were complete and transcribed and checked for accuracy, I loaded data into Dedoose, a qualitative data management software tool. Formal data analysis occurred in three phases: open,¹⁰ axial, and selective coding. Glesne (2011) recommended sharing codes and themes with peers and colleagues to make sure that “your interpretation is the right one” (p. 211). Kelly assisted with open coding.

Open coding was conducted in rounds. First, a priori codes were created and shared with Kelly. These codes were developed based on the literature review, theory, and initial ideas from conducting the interviews that were recorded in memos I had written. These a priori codes were social networks, information, race/ethnicity, class or social class, good schools, preferences, strategies, time investment, and anxiety. From there, the first two interviews were independently coded by Kelly and me. We then met to discuss agreement and differences in coding as well as adding new codes. During this meeting the codebook expanded to 38 open codes.

Documenting the changes to the open codes and tracking new codes were critical to this process. These changes were tracked in a codebook that was stored in an Excel file. The file had one column with the codes and another column with code descriptions. Within the code descriptions, there was a definition and an example quote. New codes were added in the rows. After each meeting with Kelly, a new column was added that included any revisions made to the code definition. For instance, “cost of aftercare” was one open code. In the next column there was a definition (“Parental consideration of school choice based on cost of after care at end of school day”) and an example quote

¹⁰ Saldaña (2016) referred to this as initial coding.

(“At this point, I mean there are other things to consider the cost of aftercare at these schools a lot higher than Salem, so I have to factor that in times two”). See **Table 5** for an example codebook entry.

Table 5

Example Codebook Entry

Code	Code description	Revised code description 11/1/2020
Distance hard to deal with/commute	Definition: Travel distance from home to school as a barrier or consideration of school choice or enrollment process. Example: “The distance will be kind of hard to deal with, [or] do, with two toddlers who may be testy in the morning.”	Definition: Travel distance from home to school as a barrier or consideration of school choice. Example: “The distance will be kind of hard to deal with, [or] do, with two toddlers who may be testy in the morning.”

Interviews were independently coded, typically in batches of two to three. Once interviews were coded, we reviewed each other’s codes and met on Fridays to decide how to resolve differences in open codes and, as needed, revised open codes and definitions. These meetings generally took place once every 1 to 2 weeks, and they lasted about 60–90 minutes. They focused on coming to consensus in coding, revising definitions in existing open codes, and considering adding new codes. Open coding resulted in 61 open codes that represented mothers’ experiences.

After breaking the data apart during open coding, as Daly (2007) described being at the widest part of a diamond, throughout axial coding we began the task of putting the data back together again. As such, the large number of open codes was reduced based on the research questions as well as the codes that were used most (Saldaña, 2016). The memos and codes were also used to identify main themes of the research (Hatch, 2002). This was also completed in Excel. The open codes were first organized into broader categories. For example, a logistics category was initially used to describe the open codes “cost or availability of aftercare,” “distance hard to deal with/commute,” “I don’t want two drop-offs,” and “aftercare spaces.” Frequencies and co-occurrences of codes were also run in Dedoose to examine salience and overlap of codes. Codes with low frequencies were collapsed with similar codes. For example, open codes “I don’t want two drop-offs” and “distance hard to deal with/commute” were combined since both were related to travel to school.

Through this process, codes were merged and the broader categories these codes fell under become more refined. This resulted in 23 axial codes, which were stored in Excel along with a definition and an example. For instance, the axial code “other side/this side of the river” was defined as “the role that geography played as a constraint and a factor in the school choice process and how where you live and access to desirable schools is important.” Another example is “it’s about how you rank your application,” which was defined as the “importance of how parents rank schools on applications to elicit the best chances of getting into preferred school.”

The final step was selective coding, which began with looking both within and across cases to understand how these codes fit together and told the story of the data (LaRossa, 2005). In addition, the categories outlined by Delve (n.d.) were helpful in organizing the story of the data:¹¹

- Subcategory 1: Phenomenon
- Subcategory 2: Causal conditions
- Subcategory 3: Strategies
- Subcategory 4: Consequences
- Subcategory 5: Context
- Subcategory 6: Intervening conditions

The 23 axial codes were categorized under one of these six category headings, which were revised to make them more appropriate for the current research study using these axial codes.

A constant comparative method was then used to organize the data so that comparisons between cases could be made to identify emergent themes and connections (Glesne, 2011). For this study, a tab was created for each participant, and rows were interview excerpts organized by the six columns described above. Then a summary table was created where the rows were for each participant, the columns were the initial selective codes from the six categories above, and the cells were filled with short quotes and phrases to capture main ideas (Glesne, 2011). The selective codes were further refined as the quotes were analyzed within and across participants (see **Table 6**).

¹¹ Categories taken directly from website.

The primary themes that emerged from this process were as follows: (1) where mothers lived mattered in their ranking of good schools, and school preferences and waitlists played a large role in this; (2) while each family had individual preferences, race played a role in not only what they looked for in schools, but also, for the Black mothers, which schools they put on their applications; and (3) this single lottery year was but one piece in these mothers' efforts to plan their children's educational pathways. The mothers' social class position gave them the resources to do this and to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 6*Final Selective Codes*

Code	Example quote
Lottery results and waiting to see how things shake out	“And the school we got into is fine. The scores are good for DC, they’re good. You know, we visited and there’s a huge play area, you know, all that. It’s just, there’s nothing about it that excites us.”
Everyday conditions: What’s important for your family and getting information on schools/lottery	“The open house dates was a definite like, entries in here. And then once we started going to the open houses and we had like notes from the visit was an additional column.”
Neighborhood context: Housing and the proximity of good schools	“There’s definitely a sense in which like, these schools that are 90% Black on this side of town don’t get the same level of popularity and people trying to get into them as schools that are just in a different area.”
It’s about how you rank your application: Strategies to increase chances of getting into preferred schools	“So if you have a public school that you’re zoned for like the ones on the hill it’s not even worth applying for them if you’re not in zone, because there’s no way that you will get in. Because they’re, they can fill up for the most part, with people in zone, or in proximate zones who lives like .5 miles from the zone.”
School settings: Diversity and parent impressions of school staff and other parents	“I’m Black and I have concerns, you know, if my sons go to school, or they’re gonna be singled out every time something goes wrong, or if they respond to a situation in a way that’s age appropriate.”
Intervening conditions: Participant strategizing amid setbacks and the impact of COVID on participant planning	“I’ve applied for and they’ve been accepted to a private preschool in October. That might be a possibility. I haven’t signed the contract or accepted it yet.”

Quantitative Data Analysis

SPSS version 24 was used for the merging and analysis in this study. The school file that was created for the study was used to show demographic statistics on DC STAR ratings, school demographic characteristics, school waitlist information, and acceptance rates. Acceptance rates are the number of waitlist offers made by October divided by the number of waitlisted students on results day. The SPSS Means procedure was used to calculate the means and standard deviations for all tables. Estimates are also presented for charter and traditional public schools and by ward, which were variables available in the merged school file.

Data Quality

This section describes efforts to ensure data quality within the research design. Krefting (1991, p. 215) referred to this as “truth value,” which is “how confident the researcher is with the truth of the findings based on the research design, informants, and context.” Strategies to ensure quality of design, analysis, and research processes are discussed, followed by a section on researcher reflexivity, which is an “assessment of the influence of the investigator's own background, perceptions, and interests” in the study (Krefting, 1991, p. 218).

Quality of Design

Several quality-of-design issues related to this study were addressed: access, transparency, adopting a longitudinal design, utilizing qualitative and quantitative methods in answering the research questions, and maintaining confidentiality. As a student, a full-time employee, a father of three young children who was conducting this

study during a pandemic, I did not have the opportunity to go out into the community to recruit participants. Therefore, I utilized the colleague point of contact that I discussed in the data collection section, Kelly, to quickly gain access to the community via the parenting listserv, and I had to rely heavily on her and the other interview participants via snowballing to introduce me to other parents.

Gatekeeping and points of access led to the second quality issue regarding my proposed design: transparency. By transparency I am specifically talking about what I shared with research participants regarding why I was conducting the study, what my aims were, and “to whom am I accountable” (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2015, p. 1197). My theoretical background examines the ways that social background (race, class) influences parenting practices and educational decisions. Social class is often not at the forefront of parents’ thinking, and it rarely is seen as something that influences their attitudes and beliefs regarding childrearing (Lareau, 2011). However, race does play a more prominent role in parent decisions with schools (Lareau et al., 2021). I did not specifically tell parents about my interests in social class or race as an analytic variable, but I did tell them I was interested in studying parents’ strategies for securing preschool seats in DC. Having three young children of my own helped me relate to their experiences as parents and gain rapport. For example, during our talks Evelyn would ask me how my kids were doing and how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted my research.

One way that a study can increase its fidelity is through “numerous interviews and observation periods” (Krefting, 1991, p. 218). This study did so through its longitudinal design, conducting 12 in-depth interviews over the course of a year while participants

navigated the DC school lottery. Following participants at multiple data points allowed for clarification in participants' statements and observation of change over time. For example, I reviewed earlier interviews before each meeting with participants, and I used this time to identify areas where I wanted to probe more on topics that I had not been able to earlier.

The study also utilized qualitative and quantitative data in its design to increase what Guba (1981) referred to as applicability, which is the extent to which the experiences of my participants apply to others participating in the DC lottery. The in-depth interview findings, coupled with the quantitative data on school enrollment, DC STAR scores, waitlist data, and acceptance rates, supplemented and confirmed what the three mothers told me about their strategies for ranking schools.

There was also the issue of maintaining participant confidentiality. The informed consent form indicated that only I would have access to participant names and that the final project would use pseudonyms. While general information about Washington, DC, was described to better understand the site, more detailed information about the neighborhoods where families reside and the schools that they were considering was not provided.

While this study fulfilled an academic obligation for obtaining my PhD, I had an obligation to the participants who provided me with their stories over the course of a year and their struggles in securing the best education for their children. This obligation extended to making meaningful conclusions that can inform our understanding of social class, race, parent decision making, and education and education lotteries more generally.

In fact, Layla asked to see the results of the study, so as a courtesy I emailed the mothers a summary of my research findings when my analysis was complete. To accomplish this aspect of quality, there had to be a rigorous analysis of data.

Quality of Analysis

Anfara et al. (2002) argued that qualitative researchers need to write into their studies specific steps they will take to ensure that the analysis is of high quality. They outline four quantitative terms and align them to qualitative terms, connecting them with specific methods that qualitative researchers can use. The quantitative terms are credibility (internal validity in quantitative research), transferability (external validity in quantitative research), dependability (reliability in quantitative research), and confirmability (objectivity in quantitative research; Anfara et al., 2002). This study used triangulation, member checks, thick description, and peer examination to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Triangulation. Creswell (2012) defined triangulation as a “process of corroborating evidence from different individuals (e.g., a principal and a student), types of data (e.g., observational fieldnotes and interviews), or methods of data collection (e.g., documents and interviews) in descriptions and themes in qualitative research” (p. 259). Triangulation ensures that researchers are not relying on a single participant’s view, a single source, or a single method when making claims about the data. This study used the data collected through formal semistructured interviews to create a description of how parents make decisions regarding their children’s early education settings. Data were continuously analyzed throughout collection to search for inconsistencies in findings

across participants and types of data. Likewise, consistencies across data were also documented. Quantitative data was also used to triangulate the data provided in the interviews around access to good schools and lottery strategies.

Member checking. Member checking is the “process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account” (Creswell, 2012, p. 259). Member checking can be accomplished in several ways, such as transcribing interviews and giving the transcript back to the participant and having the participant confirm that nothing is missing, conducting an interview with the participant after the interview has been transcribed, conducting a focus group and leading a conversation with a group of participants based on aggregated data, and having participants read over the initial results based on all data (Birt et al., 2016). Cho and Trent (2006) referred to having participants read transcribed interviews as “technical member checks” (p. 328). However, this type of member checking can be problematic, particularly in cases where the topic may be deemed sensitive or when participants’ worldviews may be challenged. For this study, member checks were conducted through interactive interviews. As interviews were reviewed, questions were added to interviews as needed to get participants’ feedback on themes and topics. For example, one mother mentioned the use of consultants in one interview, and I asked other mothers about this as well.

Peer reviews and sending participant summaries to the mothers were also used as member checks. Since I came into this research project with assumptions about social class, the peer reviews and discussions were vital. These peer reviews included my friend

Kelly who helped with coding and my dissertation chair. These peer reviews were essential because they provided valuable feedback about the role race was playing in the data. In addition, participant summaries were sent to the three mothers after the third interviews (see Appendix F). During the third interview, they were asked for feedback and none was given.

Thick description. Thick description is the “process of paying attention to contextual detail in observing and interpreting social meaning when conducting qualitative research” (Mills et al., 2017, p. 943). Thick description helps to build theory and is a vital part of ethnographies as they report on cultures and participants’ lived experiences (Glesne, 2011; Wolcott, 2008). Thick description involved identifying how actions and statements have particular meaning in context. I relied on my notes and my conversations with Kelly and my chair to think about meaning and context.

Quality of Research Processes

Educational research is influenced by values, both the researcher’s and the participants’, that must be addressed in the research design (Howe, 2009). Ghaffar-Kucher (2015) challenged researchers to think about how our “own history and positionality shape and influence the research” (p. 1198). I came into this research with assumptions about how social class permeates our daily life. Being a White male also impacts how I see the world. These assumptions were based on my own background, and they must be documented so that those reading my work can decide for themselves how much my personal biases may influence what I see in the data. As I explained above, my experiences were formative for me and helped me develop a sensitivity toward “others”

who worked hard and tried to do the best that they could even though they made mistakes and they could not get ahead educationally or financially. My education, and moving to DC, has provided me with opportunities where I see the other extreme where there is privilege and an expectation that people and institutions will cater to their individual needs.

My background comes with benefits and costs. On the one hand, I hope that my research will inform policymakers, researchers, and the general public about privilege beyond financial resources and how that translates to academic success. On the other hand, I had to make sure that my analysis reflects reality and that my own biases were not impacting the questions I asked participants or how I analyzed the data. This was why it was helpful having Kelly and my chair serve as critical thinkers and as a type of member check and peer review. There is also an issue of ethics. This was a study on families. My ethical philosophy was guided by the main emphasis of Institutional Review Boards: Do no harm to participants. As such, I had a responsibility to ensure that the data the mothers in this study trusted me with remain confidential and secure.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The focus of social class on preschool choice is rooted in my family and work experiences. I have three older sisters who attended college, but I was the first one in my immediate family to finish. While I had a lot of social support and never went without anything that I needed financially, I often had to figure things out on my own with my educational career. This background led me to my interest in social class. These experiences have instilled a sensitivity to privilege and the subtle social forces operating

in our daily lives that give some advantages, particularly around social class. However, as a White male, my focus on social class and theories around social class meant that I had to rely on peer reviews to think critically about other themes identified in the data. This was particularly true for race because the chosen theory did not acknowledge race. Peer reviews and discussions with my chair helped bring out other facets of the data that would not have been identified otherwise.

Introduction to the Findings

Cultural capital and community cultural wealth theories both highlight the importance of how information is used to navigate complex institutions such as schools (Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Yosso, 2005). The next three chapters lay out the three mothers' processes navigating the DC lottery system over the course of 1 year during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter 4 focuses on the mothers' initial processes, including the emotional process of the lottery, how they were not just thinking about preschools, and the sources of information utilized. Chapter 5, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, uncovers the informal rules of the DC lottery identified by the three mothers and describes their strategies for ranking schools on lottery applications. Chapter 6 discusses postlottery results, enrollment for the 2020–21 school year, how families adjusted to the COVID-19 pandemic, and, finally, plans for participating in the lottery again. Overall, these chapters demonstrate the time these parents invested in this process and how informal rules guided their decision making. Yet despite the resources expended, all were playing the lottery again the following school year.

The results illustrate the effort the mothers who participated in this study expended when gathering this information. This was an emotionally taxing process for them, in terms of time involved to research schools and because of the uncertainty of the outcomes. As upper-middle-class parents, they had the time to collect this information,

but their class-based informational resources did not guarantee their success in securing seats in preferred schools. Moreover, families of color must navigate institutional spaces that were not created for them (Yosso, 2005). This was evident for the two Black mothers in this study, who specifically noted how diverse school settings were essential to protect their children from class and racial bias among school staff and other parents.

Chapter Four: “Playing the Lottery”: Initial Processes to Identifying Preschools

The initial steps that these mothers took when looking for their children’s preschools included considering what was important for their family’s experiences of preschool, which ranged from looking for schools with language immersion to seeking schools that were economically and racially diverse. However, this was an emotional process for mothers based on the uncertainty of the results. The process was also high stakes for some mothers since they were not just looking for preschools, but they were also planning their children’s later schooling as well. In addition, participants explained the sources of information they used when beginning their search. All three mothers used government-supported information such as test scores, waitlist data, and other information provided by the DC school lottery website. They also relied on information from other parents, parenting websites, and listservs, which provided specific feedback related to the issues about which participants were most concerned. Attendance at open houses was also an integral part of this information-gathering process, where parents were able to see in person how administrators talked about schools and how they interacted with school staff and other parents. Families acknowledged their own resources that both enabled and constrained their participation in the preschool lottery process.

These mothers also expended a significant amount of time and resources investigating preschool programs that best fit their families' needs. Despite the significant resources that they put in this process, there was some ambivalence about the importance of PK3 and PK4. Sara said that "even if it's, you know, has a one star, and the kids aren't doing well, [it] is probably good enough for PK," while Layla contextualized her efforts as more about her son's later schooling, saying she and her wife "just kind of like agreed that preschool, probably it's not that big of a deal."

Securing a seat in a desired school was not guaranteed, and some strategizing would be needed to rank lottery applications. As such, all mothers adopted lottery-related terms when describing this process even though they were selecting their children's preschools. Sara and Evelyn both discussed "playing" the lottery. Layla used phrases such as playing "the strategy game," "playing the numbers," and "playing the odds" when referring to school waitlists. The use of this terminology reflects the uncertainty of securing seats in these parents' preferred schools despite their own status. Sara had the benefit of having one son already in school (Salem Elementary),¹² but she knew that in the long term that school would not be a good fit because her older son's school "is a Title I school [and] is not very well resourced at all. The teachers are great, and he's gotten great support with his speech. But I also know that long term is not going to be a good fit." Sara described the process of synthesizing all the information for her as "haphazard" and a "combination of intuition and then, you know, research into hard data,

¹² School pseudonyms and rounding of quantitative data are used in the results to protect the anonymity of the schools mentioned by the mothers.

but also keeping in mind that my son has some special needs.” The following sections describe participants’ initial processes for gathering information on schools.

“Kind of Nerve Wracking”: The Lottery Process as an Emotional Experience

The lottery process represented a high-stakes decision for most of the mothers because it meant securing spots in coveted elementary schools and possibly beyond. At the beginning of this process, Layla and her wife felt behind since they had not attended DC EdFEST, where “all our peers were starting was, you know, going to like the fair where they get to talk to all the people from the schools and get information and booklets and stuff to research and all that stuff.” Layla said that preschool was the “best chance to get into a good school,” and this pressure about selecting “his high school right now” meant that the actual process of the lottery was “what made this decision kind of like really high stakes and it’s like, put all this pressure and I’m like, I’ve been like, biting my nails waiting for the results to come out.” There was also some evidence that the number of options available, combined with the varied preferences that mothers had, made the process overwhelming too. For example, Layla mentioned that she appreciated having the different language options available, despite being frustrated by the process.

Evelyn was the most relaxed about the process. Her preferences included a school that was close to her home so that they could spend time together as a family and not traveling across DC. Among the three mothers, she seemed to devote the least amount of resources to this process as far as time spent searching for schools and worrying about the results, and she recognized at the beginning of the lottery she had no control over what would happen. Sara also looked at this as a “process that never ends” that extends to

middle school and high school. She admitted that “you don't know that until you get in there.” Sara viewed this process as risk mitigation where “my goal is just, you know, to minimize the risk as much as possible and try to find them what I think might be the best fit.” Part of the risk to Sara was that her children were young, she did not know their learning style at this age, and she was concerned about school environments. However, she did acknowledge that the current lottery was easier than the last one, where she was “completely nuts, didn’t sleep very well, you know, woke up in the middle of night fretting about it. Because I think it is such a high-stakes thing.” Even so, Sara “always [had] the fear of making the wrong decision.”

While Layla liked “the fact that there is a lottery that we can apply to any school in DC,” she admitted that she found the lottery process “kind of nerve wracking.” These feelings centered around the uncertainty of the lottery and feelings that she was “in limbo.” This was particularly true about the lack of communication from the DC lottery when she was waitlisted: “They don’t send any notices. So that I feel like I have to check it constantly.” However, she still acknowledged that this choice allowed her to consider “charter schools” and “language immersion” that would not necessarily be available in Virginia or Maryland, so overall she said that “I really would miss the options that DC allows.” Having participated in the lottery the previous academic year, Sara had less anxiety and more understanding of the workings of the lottery. However, because her younger son was entering PK3 for the first time, she had to play the lottery again for him, “but it was a lot less stressful because I knew no matter what we had a seat at least at one

place. I knew we would get a seat at Salem. It was just a matter of when you know if waitlisted, but we weren't."

Perhaps trying to balance these feelings of anxiety with calm, all three mothers expressed some questions about how important preschool was for children's development. For example, Layla said, "We kind of like debated about like, okay, when does it start to matter, like for preschool, you know, PK3, really does it matter?" However, in the context of the preschool lottery and these mothers' preferences, preschool did matter, not only for their children's education, but also for their children's educational pathways. Layla said that getting into a preferred school during PK3 was their best chance because "to get into a school for PK4 there's so many less spots, because it means that people are leaving because they're unhappy or, you know, a parent moves away which is a more one off." Sara thought that even if a school "has a one star and the kids aren't doing well [it] is probably good enough for PK. Yeah, if your goal is to get your kid into a PK program and get out of paying daycare, your neighborhood school probably is good enough." Evelyn said that "PK3 isn't a necessary year of school and she was enjoying the daycare," so they considered the option of keeping their daughter in a private child care center if they did not get into their preferred school. This idea of PK not being necessary, or questioning when PK starts to matter, or what was good enough, was consistent across all three mothers. Sara took the longer view that even if you don't get into the best schools, "you'll get in somewhere and it'll be fine for 2 years." After that she said parents "may need to panic a little bit more." However, she said this with the benefit of hindsight, having gone through this process once already. By

panicking, she was referencing the importance of the quality of the school for the later elementary grades, which included concerns regarding behavior problems of other students in the class.

“We’re Picking His High School Right Now”: What Mothers Wanted in Preschools

The mothers in this study looked for a range of preschool characteristics for their children. For all three families, location and proximity of preschool were important considerations, particularly in terms of convenience. This preference was driven by the age of their children—the child for whom they were looking for preschool as well as siblings. For example, Sara had first played the lottery the prior academic year and had not chosen one school because “the distance will be kind of hard to deal with, [or] do, with two toddlers who may be testy in the morning.” She had looked for a school location for her older son that was near her younger son’s childcare because “I didn’t want to have to make several trips in different directions.” Proximity and convenience was a consistent theme for Sara. During the current lottery period, because her younger son was going into PK3, she still did not want to have multiple drop-offs. Layla also mentioned that proximity to home was important, searching for all of the schools that were within a 5-mile radius of her home. Like Sara and Layla, proximity to home was one of the primary characteristics for preschools for Evelyn. She used Google Maps to see what their daily commute would be like because as a family they had to “weigh in the opportunity cost of spending an hour in the car each day. Just driving to and from school.” Keeping proximity in mind, Evelyn’s family thought globally about what was important for them at this point in their lives, and for them it was being able to spend time together while

their daughter was in elementary school, while also being comfortable with where she was attending and the education she would receive.

Layla and Sara both sought schools that fed into “good” middle and high schools or that would at least offer some stability during the elementary school years. That is, they were looking for elementary schools that provided enrollment into highly rated middle and high schools. When discussing the importance of feeder schools in thinking about this process, Sara said that “PK is fine, but I know at some point we’re going to have to look at other schools because the school that my current school feeds into is not a great middle school.” In the background Sara also felt like “for PK, I think most of the schools are actually pretty decent. I think the concern is upper grades...that’s when parents I think really start to get more concerned about school quality.” Here Sara was referring to the later elementary grades, not middle or high school. She thought the advantage of being so aggressive in playing the lottery for preschool was that “it’s easier to get your kid into a school that’s a good school and you know, you can stay there to fifth grade, as opposed to having to constantly—well, every year you’re thinking about moving somewhere else.” This echoes Layla’s thoughts about the importance of feeder schools in the lottery process, as there was a lot of pressure on Layla to try to get her son into a good feeder track because “this is the best chance to get into a good school that then feeds into another good school that then feeds into another good school. And so we’re like, holy crap, we’re picking his high school right now!” The pressure was related more to this feeder track system and taking a longer view of children’s educational pathways, rather than solely considering whether they were getting into a good preschool.

Participants frequently referred to “good schools,”¹³ noting standardized test scores and ranking websites, such as greatschools.org, when talking about school quality and proximity. Layla mentioned that there were not schools with “the scores that we want” and “consistently good rankings.” When she spoke about feeder schools, she mentioned how she did not want a high school where “1% of the kids are proficient in math.” When asked how the lottery process could be improved, Layla brought up the relationship between diversity and test scores and stated that “diversity issues and income differentials that get perpetuated [through the lottery], you know, at certain schools, you know, schools having, you know, ending up being in areas that are really affluent and having access to more resources.” Layla said that the lottery could be improved by accounting for diversity and income so that “there wouldn’t be such a clustering of White people at the better schools because they get in boundary preference because they buy the expensive houses.” Layla experienced this firsthand because she moved during this process. Layla had moved to a higher resourced area and stated during the last interview that her new neighborhood school “has just insanely high scores, like so much higher than any of the schools that we considered last year.”

Sara described how her older son’s school was a “Title I school [and] is not very well resourced at all.” In addition, she mentioned STAR ratings from the DC report card in her valuations, stating that “there’s some schools that are pretty much highly regarded, highly rated, so I put those in based on you know, opinions, other people, test scores,

¹³ Throughout the results, “good schools” are mentioned as this is the language that parents used in their conversations. References to “good schools” represents parents’ opinions informed by test scores, STAR ratings, and rankings on websites.

STAR ratings.” When talking about her older son’s school, Salem, she referred to it as a “one-star school where everyone gets free lunch and, you know, there are kids, you know, who are really poor and kids who are a little more well off.” Presumably, Sara was referring to the DC STAR ratings; Salem was a two-star school in 2019. Sara also mentioned behavior issues that schools begin to see more of in the early elementary grades and how teachers have to “spend a lot of time trying to bring those kids up to speed. So, if you have a child that’s already on grade, they get completely ignored.” Sara referenced the “tough environments” of some children in schools and how schools spend more time trying to make sure those children are caught up rather than other children “already on grade.” This informed Sara’s decisions that the early grades were fine, but decisions around changing schools would need to be made once her boys advanced in elementary school. She brought her sons’ race into these considerations, saying that “I have two little Black boys. I really can’t risk their safety and their opportunities in life. I can’t—I don’t have the, you know—I don’t have that luxury...not taking certain things very seriously.”

For Sara and Layla, the two Black mothers in this study, being in a racially diverse school was essential to protect their children from class and racial bias among school staff and other parents. They feared assumptions of school staff and their children feeling as if they didn’t belong. Layla mentioned that “as people of color...[there is] sometimes the propensity to, like, assume that, ‘Oh, they’re gonna need extra help to stay on track.’” Here she was referencing how school staff perceive Black students. On the other hand, Layla did not want a predominately Black school for her son either—she

wanted a school with a mix of races. While she did not explicitly say why she wanted a mix of races, she seemed to consider there to be benefits of diversity within schools overall. Layla argued that the reason her local schools were lacking was because a lack of social class diversity, arguing that “when you have just different types of people, different class levels, ...it drives up the engagement of the parents. And there are higher expectations for the school.” Layla seemed to be suggesting here that socioeconomic diversity creates community and engagement within the schools that is beneficial to all students.

Sara did not want her sons to be a racial or social class minority in a school because she was fearful of them being singled out or feeling out of place because of their race. She sensed that in some of the schools that she visited that is what could happen. This was also true regarding her social class. Sara stated that “some other schools, they were probably even public schools and other neighborhoods in DC, they will be out of place because we’re not wealthy.” Sara went on to explain that some schools have Parent Teacher Association (PTA) budgets of more than \$100,000 a year that allow schools to pay for additional staff. She was concerned that even if her sons got into one of those schools, they would not provide a welcoming environment “for my, you know, minority middle-class children.” Test scores were also important for Sara, especially as they related to how schools addressed the opportunity gap between White and Black students. She specifically “looked at schools that maybe we have a smaller gap or were doing a really good job. As far as test scores anyway, it was teaching African American children.”

While Evelyn also wanted school diversity, this was a matter of preference rather than necessity. She did not mention considering whether her daughter would be treated differently in the schools because of her social class or race. This was a specific burden for the two Black mothers. Evelyn, as a White mother in a predominately Black neighborhood, did not feel comfortable sending her daughter to an “all-White school.” She said it would be “weird” and “not right” to send her daughter to a predominately White school given the makeup of her neighborhood. This desire for diversity and inclusion was consistent throughout the interviews with Evelyn. Later, when her daughter was enrolled in PK3, she proudly spoke of the efforts that her daughter’s school made to create racially diverse small groups for students and teachers during classroom instruction despite meeting virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The mothers reflected specific values and philosophies of their families related to how children ought to be raised as they sought preschools. Layla mentioned several times throughout the study, as she moved through the lottery process, that language immersion was important to her in terms of her preschool selection. While she never explicitly stated why language immersion was important to her, indication of this desire emerged when she was talking about Westview, which was her preferred school that offered language immersion. Layla described how the administrator echoed what she was looking for and how the school thought that “language is really important because it kind of opens your mind to all these different cultures and people and, you know, ways of looking at things, and like so for them like language was the gateway to like, how you think about learning overall.” This is contrasted by other schools that had uniforms. Layla did not like

uniforms, saying that “it just restricts individuality. And I understand the reasons for them, but I just don’t like them.” The beliefs around school diversity mentioned above and preferences for language immersion and teaching of different cultures all speak to the desire to have her son exposed to people from different backgrounds. Elsewhere she also mentioned an emphasis on schools reflecting the broader community and the effects of gentrification on schooling and communities of color. As such, sending her son to a school east of the river was also important “so that we can drive our resources and time and money and effort into schools over here.”¹⁴ In order to keep track of all these desired characteristics, her family kept a color-coded spreadsheet to rank and list schools based on their interest as a family. Layla considered herself a “science person,” and this was reflected in her structured spreadsheet where she could keep track of the schools they were considering. This spreadsheet listed all the schools in proximity to their house and included characteristics such as distance from home, grades served, test score information, open house dates, and DC STAR rating and other schools ratings, such as those from [greatschools.org](https://www.greatschools.org). There was also a column for notes on each school. They included notes from the open houses, and Layla began assigning color codes to indicate her rankings.

Sara’s experiences in this lottery were different because she had gone through the lottery process the previous year. Her older son, who was moving to PK4, had an individualized education plan (IEP), and she suspected her younger son, in the future,

¹⁴ For DC residents, “east of the river” refers to neighborhoods that are east of the Anacostia River, which encompasses Wards 7 and 8. These two wards have the lowest median household income out of the eight wards in DC.

would also have an IEP. As such, finding schools that could support her sons' IEPs and special needs was important. For her, this initially ruled out Montessori schools' large classrooms. She also said that the cost and availability of aftercare and proximity to school was important for her in her preschool search. Some additional characteristics that were important for Sara included STAR ratings, allowing children time for play, and being around other parents that value education.

“Talk to Other Parents as Much as You Can”: Using Sources of Information

While the preschool characteristics that the mothers were looking for were diverse, their sources for information about schools were fairly narrow, relying heavily on quantitative data from government-sponsored sources, school-sponsored open houses, social networking sites, and, to a lesser degree, their own personal networks. The government-sponsored sources in this section refer to data and metrics largely sponsored by DC Public Schools (DCPS) that provided numerical and basic descriptive data related to school demographics, lottery preferences, quality, ratings, and waitlists. DC offers a variety of sources for parents to gather information on schools. Information was also received through personal networks and soliciting feedback from parenting listservs, online neighborhood groups, and local parenting websites. Parents seemed to rely on information gained through these channels for more tailored information specific to parents' preferred preschool characteristics. Online sources, such as parenting listservs, were particularly important and seemed to be more influential than specific people in the mothers' networks.

Government-Sponsored Sources

Parents had access to numerous data on school performance, location, and programs through government-sponsored events and platforms. DC EdFEST was a school fair organized by DCPS so parents can meet school staff and have their questions regarding individual schools answered. Despite being much publicized by DC Public Schools, DC EdFEST was not a key source of information in this process. Layla and Evelyn had not attended the school fair. Layla had had a conflict with work, and her wife had attempted to go but it was raining and there was a line out the door to get in. Evelyn did not provide an explanation for not attending. Sara had gone to EdFEST and got materials from schools but found that the staff there could not answer all of her questions. She later noted that you may not get any more information there than you would get from a school's website.

However, all three mothers utilized information from the My DC School Lottery website, accessing information such as waitlist data, STAR ratings, and test scores. Parents can also search for schools by proximity to their physical address or by school name. This website also has videos that explain the lottery process. According to Evelyn, the information provided to parents was helpful and “they’ve done their best to try and make it clear.” Layla and Sara both mentioned the video that explains the lottery process as well. While Sara said that My DC School Lottery has “videos that explain the lottery,” Layla did not recall where she found the video. She said, “I found a random video online that explained, you know, how the lottery works and that completely changed the way we were thinking about our numbers, like the way that we were ranking.” In reviewing this information from websites, Layla paid attention to “how many people came in off the

waitlist, you know how big was their waitlist, all that stuff.” In addition, she mentioned that she “scoured” ratings from Great Schools, an independent site that rates schools.

Finally, there were the school open houses that the mothers attended. While these were events hosted by public schools, the mothers in this study used these events to see how school staff interacted with parents. They were not just looking for the same types of information found on school websites. Evaluating school settings through open houses was an important component to identifying preschools that were a good fit. Participants looked for small details that could provide clues regarding how schools functioned. During these visits, parents were very attentive to how administrators talked about schools. For Layla, one administrator “just didn’t really seem very happy” and another came across as “really cavalier” because “he wasn’t trying to sell the place, he was just like ‘I know you want me and so let me tell you what your chances are to have me.’” At open houses Evelyn also looked at how teachers and administrators interacted. She stayed away from administrators who gave simplistic answers. In one instance Evelyn said that a school administrator was asked about a student with disabilities and thought the answers were simplistic. She wanted her daughter to go to school that was inclusive. Layla also noted that she paid attention to possible negative messaging in the schools. Sara described some school environments as “cold” and “rigid.” Her perceptions of schools were informed by the feelings she got from other parents as well, and she questioned whether she could see herself working with some parents in a PTA. Sara acknowledged that these were quick judgments, “but the environment just didn’t feel very welcoming.”

She went on to say, “I’m Black and I have concerns, you know, if my sons go to school or they’re gonna be singled out every time something goes wrong.”

Listserve, Online Groups, and Parenting Websites

Gathering this important data from government-sponsored events and websites was but one step in the process of looking at preschools. While the educational and waitlist data provided by DC websites offered objective measures of key characteristics, participants also desired to know about the actual experiences of other parents. For this, the mothers’ social networks were influential in gathering more specific experiences about schools. As Sara said, “Other parents are probably your best source of information—you can’t go solely on test scores, you can’t go solely on, you know, how beautiful the building is. Talk to other parents as much as you can.” She said that administrators and websites would always try to present schools in the most positive light, and because of this you needed to talk to other parents to get a clearer picture of what the schools were like. For Layla’s family, the preschool search formed some relationships as well. However, these personal networks had their limitations. Layla mentioned that while they spoke with other parents, she was “skeptical of information that’s... just based on one experience.” Meanwhile, Sara’s neighborhood did not have a lot of parents, so that limited one-on-one interactions, but she said there were occasions at the store where she would talk to a parent about the lottery. While the parents in this study did not use any consultants, during our last interview Evelyn said she personally learned about the lottery process “through my network—through like smart parents who hired like consultants to do their lottery.” Even though Evelyn did not use consultants,

this is an example of how she benefited from her well-resourced network to better understand the nuances of how the lottery worked.

Perhaps the most direct way that mothers in this study solicited feedback from other parents was by accessing local parenting websites, groups, and listservs. Evelyn and Sara both mentioned using a popular parenting site where parents can post questions. They also used local neighborhood groups. Evelyn used a local listserv where “you can write any question there and people will respond.” Sara felt like these were the best places for information: “Parenting groups, neighborhood listservs are probably the best place to get the information that you’ve got. That’s where you have people [who] will tell you their experiences with certain schools.” Sara mentioned that she had to find the various local neighborhood listservs around her and admitted “you have to kind of stumble upon it.” She described how some of the neighborhood listservs were, of course, very specific to the particular neighborhoods and sometimes seemed to “really want to keep the information in their neighborhood.” However, counter to this idea, in one instance, Sara filled out a survey for approval to join a neighborhood listserv, and even though she did not live in that specific neighborhood they let her in anyway. Sara acknowledged that information from these channels “may not necessarily be 100% accurate but just to get a real impression of...the positives and negatives of what a school are [*sic*] you have to talk to other parents.” For example, she said that she posted questions on one popular listserv and received “some really good leads on things.” Sara would use these websites to post questions or look for other parents’ posts that aligned with her questions by doing “a search and seeing if you know anyone else has already

asked the question or other information pops up.” Layla described herself as a “science person” when explaining that she did not rely too much on others’ opinions during this process. This was also evidenced by her family’s use of color-coded spreadsheets to track and keep notes of the schools they considered during this process. However, while she never mentioned the use of neighborhood groups or listservs in the interviews, she was recruited into this study through a neighborhood listserv.

“A Certain Type of Parent”: Family and Community Resources in the Lottery Process

The mothers expended significant social, cultural, and economic resources navigating the lottery system. As Layla acknowledged, collecting information from websites, other parents, and open houses is a time-intensive effort that only some parents can afford: “Parents who have the time and the resources to be going to these open houses during the workday...there’s going to be a certain type of parent, right.” Layla acknowledged that her job as an attorney provided resources that others did not have: “I can, you know, afford to like have a nanny.... I think for the average person of color, it’s still going to be prohibitive.” For her these resources included the nonmonetary aspects of her job that meant she was “of the privilege level that I can come into the school anytime I want to, I can go to all these open houses and all of that stuff and a lot of people can’t do that.” Doing these things required flexibility from her job, but her own comfort level in going into schools and interacting with school staff was a key part of this process for her. Evelyn seemed very aware of the educational inequities in DC, and she mentioned that there just were not enough good schools in DC, particularly in the East End, but the

lottery keeps more people in the city. Evelyn was the first to mention how some parents use consultants to help them through the lottery process. She said that while DC tries to make the lottery equitable and it keeps people in the city, it is a complicated process that creates another system of inequity, explaining that parents must choose multiple schools, they must locate those schools and determine where they are, and they need access to a computer.

Another example of these resources was the presence of moving or returning to private child care as a backup plan if they did not get into their preferred schools. Despite another year of private child care costing money, Evelyn's family had decided that if they had not gotten into their preferred preschool, then they would have just kept her daughter in the same child care from last year and try the lottery again the next year. During a later interview, Evelyn was asked why she would put her daughter back in child care if they did not get into their preferred school, and she said that "PK3 isn't a necessary year of school," "most of the students would be back, so there would be some consistency," and "we weren't crazy about our other options for school. And, I mean, to be honest, we just hadn't like thought that much beyond Malibu [their preferred school]." Sara relied more heavily on her own prior experiences and knowledge. She knew the intricacies of the lottery, including that you could submit postlottery applications where "you can actually go back in and add schools." More than the other mothers interviewed for this study, Sara was constantly reevaluating and reapplying for schools throughout the year, "waiting to see how things shake out at schools that I prefer."

Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic were also influenced by the resources that these families possessed. The pandemic presented an unexpected challenge for these mothers as they were going through this process. The summer before school began, there was uncertainty around what the upcoming school year would look like. Hybrid options were proposed by DC Public Schools, which signaled to some mothers that they would need to find supplemental child care arrangements to support preschool participation. Once the school year began, however, schools were completely virtual, which meant that these mothers all had to juggle work and home life while supporting their preschoolers' education on a computer. This was challenging for all of them, but like the school choice process overall, they were able to utilize their resources to navigate this difficult situation.

As discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, the COVID-19 pandemic caused child care arrangement problems for all three mothers. This was particularly true when school began because the schools were all virtual, and decisions about how and whether to enroll children in schools had consequences for everything that these mothers had planned for. If the mothers had their children in a preferred school and they decided to disenroll them, they would lose their spot in the school. Each mother chose different pathways to lessen the effects of the pandemic on their educational planning. For Layla and Evelyn, the pandemic was more of a nuisance that required finding alternative care arrangements.

The findings from this chapter demonstrated the uncertainty of the lottery process for these mothers. They adopted terms such as “playing the lottery” when referring to their preschool selection process. While all of these mothers looked for preschools that

were close to their home or work and had diverse school settings, the two Black mothers wanted to avoid schools where their children would be a racial minority. This was to protect their sons from potential racial bias among school staff and other parents. The mothers reflected specific values and philosophies of their families for how children ought to be raised as they sought preschools. To investigate the extent to which these preferences aligned with specific schools, participants relied on government-sponsored sources of information as well as information from listservs, online groups, and parenting websites. This was a time-intensive process that the mothers acknowledged not all parents could invest in. Aligning these preferences with the lottery itself is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter Five: “There’s No Way That You Will Get In”: The Informal Rules That Guided Parents’ Preparations of Lottery Applications

Families make ECE choices balancing their preferences with the constraints placed on them by contextual factors (e.g., family work situations, proximity to schools, additional children to consider; Meyers & Jordan, 2006). Likewise, the three mothers in this study balanced their specific preferences in light of the schools that were available to them. The desire to have preschools close to home or work was a constraint for participants given that they did not think the schools in their neighborhoods were “good schools.” Participants had to figure out how to align what they were looking for and their preferred schools within this constraint of proximity. They also had to do so within the confines of a lottery system with school preferences that further limited choice and reduced their chances of getting into schools outside of their neighborhoods. Putting together these desires with the realities of the informal rules of the lottery necessitated thoughtful planning and strategizing in listing schools on lottery applications.

One constraint specific to families of color is finding schools that these families feel would provide welcoming, warm environments for the children (Lareau et al., 2021). The last chapter described how this was a preference for the Black mothers in this study. This chapter describes how the mothers in this study believed that schools were perceived differently based on the racial characteristics of the schools. Using quantitative data, this

section also describes the racial and economic segregation of schools within the district, where schools in Wards 7 and 8 are majority Black and have higher percentages of homeless students.

Previous research using cultural capital theory and school choice has demonstrated that middle-class families are adept at navigating school choice systems with opaque rules (Lareau et al., 2016). Constrained by the lack of preferred schools near where they lived, this chapter describes how the three mothers in this study strategically excluded schools that they deemed too risky to place on their applications. Using interview and quantitative data from the DC lottery waitlist file, this chapter shows how school preferences and prior waitlist data are used to inform how mothers rank their lottery applications and increase their chances at getting into preferred schools.

“Doing Our Best and Throwing Our Hat Into the Ring”: Housing and the Proximity of Good Schools

Housing and the proximity of good schools were constraints for participants. In fact, geographic location was a consideration before participants had even had children. When asked about her family’s strategy on how to navigate this lottery process, Layla said that it had begun “when we were deciding where to live.” They had ended up buying a house in an area with less desirable schools, and they acknowledged that “probably around third grade...we might need to go.” Moving was a consistent theme across interviews with Layla. At one point she said, “We’re not going to compromise on the quality of school. We just know that. Those are our options: We move or we get a good lottery pick, period.” Sara shared similar feelings about moving where the schools are

better, saying that she was “considering in decamping for the suburbs, you know, after kindergarten, where, you know, where schools are maybe a little bit more consistent.” Sara acknowledged what Layla believed and also noted that some DC residents have better options than others: “I think the people who have a choice are folks who live west of the park who have great schools to begin with. The rest of us are just, you know, doing our best and throwing our hat into the ring.” For her, the randomness of “the lottery decides where you’ll end up if you don’t decide to go to your neighborhood school.”¹⁵ She linked this randomness to an equity perspective, saying that “on the one hand it [the lottery] makes things more fair, and more clear how unfair everything is that in order for my child to go to school that’s better resourced I have to enter a lottery.” Evelyn echoed the thoughts of Layla and Sara: “The problem is the location of good schools in DC. That is what plays into it, like there just aren’t any good schools this side of the river.”¹⁶

Like Layla and Sara, Evelyn believed that the location of good schools was a source of inequality that the lottery did little to diminish because “the number of schools that you can apply for in the lottery are going to be diminished than if you live in Northwest or you live even on the Hill.” For Evelyn, the lack of good schools in her area made mothers like her “more reliant on the lottery, because the public schools this side of the river by and large are not very good schools.” Publicly available data about DC STAR ratings confirmed that schools east of the river, in Wards 7 and 8, have lower mean scores than schools in Northwest DC, in Wards 1 through 4 (see Table 7). The

¹⁵ “West of the Park” refers to west of Rock Creek Park, which spans the northeastern section of Ward 3 into the northern section of Ward 4.

¹⁶ “This side of the river” refers to east of the Anacostia River, which is the area occupied by Wards 7 and 8.

average STAR ratings for schools in Northwest DC are 3.29, 3.80, 4.38, and 3.68, respectively, whereas schools in Wards 7 and 8 had lower STAR ratings of 2.50 and 2.33, respectively.

Table 7

Means and Standard Deviations for DC STAR Ratings by Ward Among DC Public Schools Offering PK3 or PK4 Programs: 2019

Ward	Number of schools	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	7	3.29	1.11
2	5	3.80	0.45
3	8	4.38	0.52
4	19	3.68	0.67
5	24	3.08	0.93
6	18	3.50	0.99
7	16	2.50	0.97
8	21	2.33	0.97
Total	118	3.16	1.05

Note. Excludes 19 schools that offered PK3 and PK4 due to missing data. Data are from 2019 DC School Report Card Aggregate Public Data.

Evelyn acknowledged the same information gained from Layla and Sara, that “there are some places where the public schools are rated really high...like people move or try to get residency in order to go to those schools.” During the second interview, when asked whether there were real differences between traditional public schools and charter schools, Evelyn said she felt like “there’s real differences. I think some of the public schools are great.... I can’t remember the name of that, but one school that Enon, maybe, I don’t know that all the parents are like, ‘Oh, your zoned for Enon, you’re okay,

like that's a great public school.'" Enon is a traditional public school with a DC STAR rating of 5 that had a waitlist of almost 600 on results day. Another example Evelyn gave was Cape Elementary School, where people who are zoned for that school "already fill the school," so there is little opportunity for families like hers to access these good public schools. Cape was a traditional public school with a DC STAR rating of 4 and a waitlist on results day of over 400.

Otherwise, Evelyn confirmed "beyond that, charter schools definitely have a preference." She said that there were some "elite" charter schools that all families try to get into. Table 8 shows STAR ratings for DC schools offering PK3 or PK4 programs by school type and offers additional support for the opinions expressed by the mothers in this study. There are more traditional public schools in wards that largely encompass Northwest DC where schools had higher STAR ratings: 31 traditional public schools in these wards versus 8 charters. There were still more traditional public schools with PK programs than charters east of the river. In Wards 7 and 8, the charters that served PK programs had slightly higher STAR ratings. This offers evidence for why these mothers focused on choosing charter schools during this process, as they provided better alternatives for schools based on school quality.

However, Layla acknowledged that this process showed her that there are some good schools in her area, but they are perceived differently because of their racial composition. She said that some schools in her area were perceived to be less rigorous because of racial composition and location: "Some of these other schools that are, like, have the same exact scores, but are on the other side of the river from us.... There's

definitely a sense in which like, these schools that are 90% Black on this side of town don't get the same level of popularity." The schools were charter schools with "really good scores and ratings... but they don't have a waitlist." In contrast, her local traditional public schools were "not great" and easy to enroll in without playing the lottery.

Table 8

Means and Standard Deviations for DC STAR Ratings by School Type and Ward Among DC Public Schools Offering PK3 or PK4 Programs: 2019

Ward	School type					
	Traditional public			Charter		
	Number of schools	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Number of schools	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	6	3.50	1.05	1	2.00	NA
2	5	3.80	0.45	0	0.00	0.00
3	8	4.38	0.52	0	0.00	0.00
4	12	3.92	0.51	7	3.29	0.76
5	7	2.57	0.98	17	3.29	0.85
6	13	3.69	1.03	5	3.00	0.71
7	12	2.42	1.00	4	2.75	0.96
8	14	2.14	0.77	7	2.71	1.25
Total	77	3.21	1.13	41	3.07	0.91

Note. Excludes 19 schools that offered PK3 and PK4 due to missing data. Data are from 2019 DC School Report Card Aggregate Public Data.

Malibu was one example. It is a public charter school in DC with two campuses, with Campus A having a higher percentage of Black students enrolled than Campus B; Campus A also had a much lower waitlist (fewer than 100) compared to Campus B, which had a waitlist of over 400. Layla attributed the waitlist differences to the racial composition of the schools since Campus A and B are the "same exact school" in two

different locations with two different racial compositions. Evelyn also mentioned this school, and noted how Malibu Campus A was an easier school with which to enroll. Evelyn explained that some parents will apply for Malibu Campus A because they know that there are open slots and they can get in; then in the next lottery they apply for a transfer (where they would receive a preference in the lottery because they already attend the school at a different campus) to have the student get into the school they ultimately wanted: Malibu Campus B. Evelyn saw this maneuvering as racist. Layla connected these issues to “areas that have gentrified,” which cuts off access to good schools. This leads to racial segregation in schools where “in a city that’s like predominately Black, you have schools that are like 10% Black.” However, she acknowledged that even if Black families got into schools in other areas, there would be issues with transportation for their children to those schools because “the parents, you know, that are working two jobs, you know, aren’t going to have the time or the, you know, resources to get their kid to a school that’s on the other side of town.” For her, some of the relationship between access to good schools and race was driven by gentrification. Even though she thought gentrification could lead to the improvement of schools, it also “pushes people of color out of a neighborhood...[and] those who have been driven out of that neighborhood no longer have access to those good schools.”

Layla discussed the location of good schools primarily along racial lines, but Evelyn added income as an additional component to the relationship between housing and access to good schools: “That means for the bulk of students who are low income, there are not very good options within driving distance.” This is something that she

acknowledged as a constraint in her own choice since proximity was important for her family. The mothers needed to operate within these constraints to find schools that had the characteristics they desired to place on their lottery application. Table 9 reflects what the mothers said about schools in their areas. Wards 7 and 8 have schools that are nearly all Black (93% and 97%, respectively), while Wards 1 and 2 in Northwest DC have much smaller Black student populations (37% and 36%, respectively). Using the percentage of homeless students as a proxy for school-level poverty shows that there are also more students who are homeless in Wards 7 and 8 (14% and 16%, respectively).

Table 9

Means and Standard Deviations for Percentage of Black and Homeless Students in Schools by Ward Among DC Public Schools Offering PK3 or PK4 Programs: 2019

Ward	Percentage of Black students in school			Percentage of homeless students in school		
	Number of schools	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Number of schools	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	8	36.50	22.28	8	7.00	3.59
2	5	36.20	14.31	5	1.60	1.52
3	8	11.75	6.45	8	0.13	0.35
4	19	48.37	23.08	19	7.32	7.62
5	25	66.76	25.94	25	8.40	7.21
6	21	60.95	26.41	21	6.19	5.34
7	20	93.15	9.80	20	14.10	7.35
8	26	96.81	3.68	26	15.85	8.67
Total	132	66.78	31.16	132	9.38	8.18

Note. Excludes five schools that offered PK3 and PK4 due to missing data. Data are from 2019 DC School Report Card Aggregate Public Data.

“You Are Just Wasting a Slot”: The Informal Rules of the Lottery

These mothers weighed the qualities that they wanted in schools with the constraints placed on them given where they lived to make their lottery selections. The video that explained the DC school lottery to parents and the website that provided prior year waitlist and admittance data both indicated that parents “arrange your list in the order you like them” (My School DC, 2019). However, the three mothers in this study did not adhere to this advice because of the informal rules that they learned: (1) Do not waste lottery picks on good traditional public schools that have neighborhood and proximity preferences; (2) do not choose schools that have large waitlists every year. The latter rule applies to traditional public schools and charter schools. In one instance, this was explicitly stated by schools. One of the letters that was handed out for a school Layla visited said that it was harder to get into than an elite college, which reflected the “really hard odds” of getting into some schools in the city.

All public schools in the district have school preferences. Traditional public schools have neighborhood and proximity preferences that public charter schools do not have. These two specific school preferences make it even more difficult for families to get into more popular traditional public schools, which, as discussed in the last section, are predominately located in Northwest DC, where these mothers did not live. Layla had one friend who tried to get into a traditional public elementary school named Enon, and “all the schools that are like around here that like are they’re really super popular ones with waiting lists of 300...they’re all proximity based.” Enon was the “number one” school in Layla’s area, and she called the principal when she was looking for schools to

place on her application to ask about her “chances of getting in” and how many people get “off the waitlists.” At first the principal asked if Layla was “in bounds,” and at that point Layla was not sure what he was referring to: “I was like, what do you mean in bounds? And he was like, where do you live? And he’s like, oh, you’re not in bounds, it doesn’t look good for you. I wouldn’t bother.”

In this case, the principal was encouraging Layla to not even apply to the traditional public school in the lottery given the school’s long waitlists. Language discouraging applying is consistent with the previously mentioned letter Layla received, which said that the school is harder to get into than an elite college. Later she said that “giving preference in boundary like that means that the schools that I get defaulted into are just the ones that are still struggling” since the more coveted traditional public schools have proximity and neighborhood preferences that mean available seats will go to those residents. Data from the 2019–20 academic year lottery reflected a high demand for the traditional public schools in particular wards. The mean waitlist number on results day for traditional public schools in Ward 1, for example, was 326.5, compared to the smaller waitlist numbers for Ward 7 (7.6) and Ward 8 (4.4; see Table 10). These numbers indicate the demand for traditional public schools in Northwest DC. On the other hand, there are large waitlist numbers for charter schools in Wards 5 and 6. Finally, the waitlists for charter schools in Wards 7 and 8 are higher than traditional public schools in those wards, which suggests a higher demand for charter schools in those wards.

Evelyn spoke about the differences between traditional public and charter schools, and she said that “some of the public schools are great,” but those are typically

neighborhood public schools that have neighborhood preferences. She seemed to know that parents in these schools “still apply for the lottery, because it gives them more options.” She knew that some parents “move or try and like get residency in order to go to those schools. And then I think beyond that, charter schools definitely have a preference, like depending on charter school, they're like some really elite charter schools in DC.”

Table 10

Means and Standard Deviations for Waitlist Length on Results Day by School Type and Ward Among DC Public Schools Offering PK3 or PK4 Programs: 2019–20

Ward	School type					
	Traditional public			Charter		
	Number of schools	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Number of schools	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	6	326.50	290.86	2	60.50	77.07
2	5	278.40	173.04	NA	NA	NA
3	8	263.50	64.55	NA	NA	NA
4	12	96.58	104.03	9	82.11	103.04
5	7	19.14	23.55	19	296.21	322.68
6	14	351.14	263.58	8	114.00	203.49
7	12	7.58	8.83	8	58.63	64.71
8	14	4.36	4.45	13	20.92	22.73
Total	78	151.54	204.87	59	137.98	228.92

Note. Represents waitlists on results day. NA = no charter schools in the ward. Data are from 2019–20 DC School Lottery Public Data.

Proximity and neighborhood preferences for traditional public schools also meant that there was less movement off waitlists at these schools. Layla said that “those popular schools tend to have less movement off of their waitlist as well. Whereas like Westview

[a public charter], there's a lot of movement off their waitlist." She said that "all the parents over here who do try to get into a school, you know, in Capitol Hill, even though it's like close to that for them or on their way to work, whatever, they just can't get their kids into these schools." Sara also had this experience and said that she was not "wasting a spot on" a school with a long waitlist that does not offer any seats. Evelyn also stated that parents should not apply to any traditional public schools in Capitol Hill because you will never get in. Those schools are already at capacity, and she said that a consultant could quickly tell you that if you do not already know. Evelyn knew not to put these schools on her lottery application, acknowledging that "it would be awesome if we lived in those neighborhoods to be on the lottery for them. But we're not in those neighborhoods." She further elaborated:

If you have a public school that you're zoned for like the ones on the Hill it's not even worth applying for them if you're not in zone, because there's no way that you will get in. Because they're, they can fill up for the most part, with people in zone or in proximate zones who lives like .5 miles from the zone.

In the end, popular traditional public schools are even harder to get into unless you live in the area catchment zones.

Table 11 shows the mean acceptance rates of schools by school type and ward. Acceptance rates were computed by dividing the number of waitlist offers made by October by the number of students waitlisted on results day. The means in Table 11 reflect the average percentage of students waitlisted who were offered seats in schools in October. Once again, these data aligned with the experiences of the mothers participating

in this study. Traditional public schools in Wards 1 through 3, which were the ones with higher STAR scores and lower percentages of Black students, also let the smallest number of students in via the lottery. For example, traditional public schools in Ward 3 accepted about 5% of students from the waitlist, while schools east of the river in Wards 7 and 8 accepted about 84% and 77%, respectively. Charter schools had higher acceptance rates than traditional public schools in each ward where they existed, except for Ward 5.

Table 11

Means and Standard Deviations for Acceptance Rates by School Type and Ward Among DC Public Schools Offering PK3 or PK4 Programs: 2019–20

Ward	School type					
	Traditional public			Charter		
	Number of schools	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Number of schools	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	6	9.70	6.97	2	100.00	0.00
2	5	10.20	7.37	NA	NA	NA
3	8	4.83	2.96	NA	NA	NA
4	11	46.56	35.55	9	57.19	43.96
5	7	68.32	33.77	19	55.53	43.86
6	14	20.21	27.59	8	58.51	44.63
7	11	83.55	23.83	8	66.51	36.58
8	13	77.04	36.65	13	85.39	23.95
Total	75	44.56	40.31	59	65.76	39.55

Note. Acceptance rate is the number of waitlist offers made by October divided by the number of waitlisted students on results day. NA = no charter schools in the ward. Data are from 2019–20 DC School Lottery Public Data.

When asked to provide final advice to other parents after looking back on her own experiences, Evelyn said:

I think the only thing I would stress more, that actually came from this year, walking it through with people in our neighborhood, and it goes back to what I said before, which is the inequity of resources, information, like how that plays into where kids end up going to school. But the reality is, people—most of the people this side of the river, in my neighborhood, so in my immediate sphere—don't understand that like if a school is already at like 100% capacity because of in-bound students, like don't even put them on your list because you're not going to get in and you are just wasting a slot.

Her specific advice to others would be to “go to their [the school's] specific page. Look at how many kids got in last year. And what their waitlist was.” Parents should look not only at waitlist data, but also at how many students come off those waitlists. Evelyn used Cape elementary as an example:

So many people put Cape on the list. I know 100%, none of them are getting in. Like Cape never lets people in. Like they don't have to [because] they have so many people in bounds or close in bounds, proximate in bounds or whatever it is, that you're never going to get in.

Cape had a waitlist of over 400 on results day and an acceptance rate of about 10%. Families who live close to Cape must still play the lottery for preschool, but the school neighborhood and proximity preferences allowed them to quickly fill those available seats. For families participating in the lottery, this means that even though Cape's waitlist

may be comparable to a public charter school, the chances of getting into the public charter may be greater because charters do not have neighborhood and proximity preferences. Evelyn compared Cape to Dale, a popular public charter school and explained that even if you got the same lottery number for both schools, the number is “not the same, because at Dale, everybody has the same, except if you have sibling preference, everybody has the same likelihood of getting in. But at Cape, you don’t actually have the same likelihood.” This is because at Cape and other popular traditional public schools, any available seats are given to the neighborhood and proximity students, but since charters do not have these, the chances are better of getting off the waitlist.

Charter schools do not have these particular neighborhood and proximity preferences, so there is less chance for an applicant to use a preference related to housing location to gain lottery advantages. Layla had friends who lacked such understanding who picked “all the most popular schools, like the 20-minute radius of here. And I’m like, ‘Oh yeah. And they didn’t do any charter school.’” This informed Layla’s strategy of focusing “more on charters because the charter schools don’t have in boundary and they don’t have proximity.” She said that she was not going to “waste my spot” on popular traditional public schools that had boundary and proximity preferences. The importance of selecting charter schools in the process is that charter schools do not have neighborhood or proximity preferences, meaning that chances of getting in them are greater compared to the more popular traditional public schools.

When asked about how straightforward this process was since the DC lottery website advised parents to list preferences in order of where they wanted their children to go, but did not emphasize prior year waitlists or school preferences, Layla said:

No, and I had to watch a few videos about how the lottery works for me to figure out like, oh, okay, so we need a couple of safety schools.... We need to, like, really strategize. I felt like maybe like if you put a school as number one and it would give you a better shot but not really, not the way that, not the way that they, they run it.

She mentioned how her neighbor “didn’t match anywhere” in the lottery because they listed all the popular schools mostly on “the other side of the river, like in Capitol Hill, like those areas.”

Sara also confirmed in our interviews that if parents adopted the strategy of listing only popular schools (either traditional public schools or charter schools) that have long waitlists every year, they could be left with no matches from the lottery. She said that on a popular listserv “I saw a lot of people who are completely shut out because they put all the schools they listed were the most popular schools. And they didn’t get in anywhere.” Sara likened the preschool lottery process with that of college admissions, where “you enter long shots and your safeties. You have to look at it the same way. You know, there are some schools that definite long shot, you know, Frost Charter is a long shot, you’re not getting in there.” Frost Charter is a popular public charter school with historically long waitlists each year. In the 2019–20 academic year, Frost Charter had a waitlist of

over 700 on results day and an acceptance rate of less than 5%. Like Layla, Sara used this as an indicator for whether or not to list certain schools on her application.

Evelyn said that people hire consultants to check final decisions and help navigate the process, and that there is a popular one in DC. She said that some parents “continuously reapply, just to see if they can get into a better school,” and she questioned whether that is “good for students.” When asked where parents could go to get information to make informed decisions, she said, “The options [available to parents] are just kind of overwhelming.” She elaborated, “I laughed and like made fun of consultants, but I could see how a consultant could be helpful, or a parent network...mom’s blog.”

Pure waitlist information was also important, and some charters were difficult to get into as well. As Layla said, “Other schools like, you know, Mantua Charter and, you know, blanking on some of them like, you know, some of these have like hundreds and hundreds of people on their waitlist.” Mantua Charter is a public charter school that has two campuses. For both campuses in the 2019–20 academic year, there was a waitlist of over 1,000 and an acceptance rate for both campuses that averaged less than 20%. These charter schools like Mantua Charter were difficult to get into, so the mothers in this study stayed away from them. Similar themes emerged from conversations with Evelyn about the importance of examining the waitlists. She said that “like Dale, Malibu Campus B, and there’s a couple others that everybody applies for and they get waitlisted at these ridiculous numbers, like you’re like waitlist number 242.”

The mothers in this study identified and implemented two informal rules as they navigated the lottery process: (1) Don’t waste lottery picks on good traditional public

schools that have neighborhood and proximity preferences; (2) don't choose schools that have large waitlists every year. As they noted, if parents were unaware of or ignored these rules, they could risk not getting accepted in any of the schools listed on their lottery applications. The next section addresses this more directly, explaining how these constraints and informal rules guided strategies in ranking lottery applications.

“It’s About How You Rank Your Application”: How Informal Rules Guide Processes for Ranking Lottery Applications

The mothers ranked schools on their applications by taking the desired characteristics they were looking for in preschools and weighing those against the realities of the lack of good schools near them and the informal rules of the lottery. School preferences were described as a constraint in the previous section, but these mothers also used them as potential tools for gaining advantage. Since they did not live in areas with desirable neighborhood schools, using school preferences as a strategy was key in ranking schools on Sara's and Layla's applications. The mothers also kept in mind the constraints around waitlists and good local schools, largely preferring charter schools in their lists over traditional public schools. Layla's family chose mostly charter schools because “we live in Southeast DC. There's not going to be schools that we're in proximity to, they're going to be like, getting the scores that we want.” Her family decided that “the charter school was our best shot” at getting into a preferred school. She contrasted her approach with others who “chose all the popular schools and didn't even consider charter, which for our neighborhood, if you want a good school you really kind of have to consider charter.” Layla preferred this school type on her application because

she deemed them to be better than the regular public schools. Evelyn agreed that charters are better unless you live in a neighborhood with a good traditional public school, and charters were the two top schools that Sara included on her application.

A balance was required when approaching this process for the three mothers. As mentioned in the previous section, they could not simply list all the preferred schools that the DC lottery video recommends, or they would risk not getting into any of the schools. This is where the risk of the lottery became most apparent. One way the mothers described the lottery process was playing “the strategy game.” This probability thinking was particularly apparent during the process of deciding how to list schools on lottery applications. For at least Sara and Layla, they put “long shots and your safeties” on their applications so that they would at least get in somewhere. Sara’s perspective when thinking about which schools to list on her application was that “you have 12 opportunities. You don’t want to make all 12 the most desirable schools because you’re not going to get in any of them.” The key is to list the highest preferences first to stay on the waitlist for those schools and the easier schools last so that they do not “lose my spot on the waiting lists at every other school. So, it’s really about how you rank your application to make sure you don’t lose your spot.”

While school preferences were a hurdle for these mothers, they also used these preferences as part of their overall strategies when ranking their applications. For example, since language immersion and feeder schools were important for Layla’s family and she was constrained by her neighborhood schools, her top preferences were the campuses for Westview. Westview is a public charter school that has two campuses, two

language programs at each campus, and a transfer preference. This means that if a student gets into one campus or program, they are given preference for later lotteries if the student applies to another campus location or program. From Layla's perspective, two campuses and two immersion programs meant "we could just transfer from French to Spanish or from Campus B to Campus A or wherever we wanted to." Each campus has a French or Spanish immersion program to which families can apply. Even though the overarching school is the same, the Campus A is easier to get into than Campus B based on waitlists. Westview also leads into a high school called Montgomery that would allow Layla's son to maintain the language immersion. However, given her understanding of the lottery, Layla also "wanted a school that we would definitely match somewhere." As such, her family put Springfield near the bottom since it was easier to get into. Springfield has several campuses in DC, but Layla never specified to which campus she applied.

Likewise, Sara played these school preferences to her advantage. In her case, however, she had a clearer advantage because of sibling preference policies. Sara viewed this application process and using the sibling preference through the lens of having "two opportunities" because she was able to put different schools on each son's application. She explained the sibling preference: "If my oldest son gets a seat at Canterbury, because his current number I think I just said number 30, then my youngest son will get moved up the list." On the other hand,

my youngest son has a better number at Robious, he's number 17. If he gets a seat then my older son will get bumped up the wait list as well. So, it really is a matter of like it's just a lot of hedging of bets and seeing who gets what.

At any school that one of Sara's sons was accepted into, her other son would have been immediately given priority. However, sibling preference could be a lower priority within school preferences than neighborhood and proximity preferences. This meant that having more than one child participate in the lottery gave her an advantage, but that advantage would not guarantee acceptance into any of her preferred schools. Sara listed two difficult schools to get into first on her application, consistent with her advice to list those preferred schools first: Robious and Westview (she did not specify which Westview programs to which she applied). Robious is a public charter that had a waitlist of about 500 on results day, and by October only three waitlist offers were made. This school therefore represented a difficult school to get into. However, Sara also mentioned James River Elementary, her local neighborhood school, and Salem Elementary, which was in proximity to her younger son's day care at the time and was the school her older son had attended the previous school year. Salem was a traditional public school that had minimal numbers of students waitlisted on results day. While Sara did not say this explicitly, Salem served as a safety school for her. She was comfortable with the school staff, and she was happy with how her older son received his IEP services at the school. If she kept her older son enrolled at Salem, it also meant that her younger son would be given a sibling preference if needed. She said,

Even if schools are open and we get another space, a space at the two schools I do prefer, there is a good chance that I will just stay at Salem. Just because who knows what this year is gonna look like. And I don't know if I'm mentally and emotionally—the, the bandwidth to do a whole lot of changing right now. Sometimes it's just easier to go with what you know.

Evelyn had the most straightforward path toward enrolling her daughter in preschool. During the first interview, Evelyn was focused on what was best for her family in this search. This meant finding a good school nearby so that they could spend quality time together. The school that Evelyn spoke most about was Malibu Campus A. She said her top choices were schools such as Malibu Campus A, Nashville Elementary, Boston Academy, and Richmond School. These were public charters except for Richmond School. Nashville Elementary has several campuses across DC in different wards. Richmond School is a traditional public school that had a large waitlist—almost 900 students waitlisted on results day.

This chapter described the processes that the mothers employed during their preschool searches, including weighing the constraints placed on them by the neighborhoods and local schools where they lived. The mothers mentioned a lack of good schools where they lived and how popular traditional public schools were in the western areas of the city. Although they could apply for these popular traditional public schools, the waitlists and school preferences made the likelihood of being offered a seat low. These informal rules guided their decisions regarding which schools to put on their lottery applications. Bringing in quantitative data on DC STAR scores, school

demographic information, and waitlist information provided additional evidence to support what these mothers described.

Chapter Six: “A Process That Never Ends”: Managing Children’s Educational Pathways Through the Lottery Results and COVID-19 Pandemic

Previous studies have shown that middle-class families expend a significant amount of time in researching schools (Roda & Wells, 2013). No studies to date have followed parents through a common enrollment lottery and collected information when these families receive their lottery results. Despite this study’s participating mothers’ time invested in this process, none of their lottery stories ended once they received their lottery results. In this way, this section conceptualizes the postlottery processes for managing children’s educational pathways as ongoing, or as Sara put it, “a process that never ends.”

For the most part, these mothers were not just thinking about their children’s preschool experiences, but instead beyond that, and even when they encountered difficulties and setbacks, they possessed the cultural and navigational capital to overcome these setbacks and put themselves in the best position to get their children into good schools.

“We Got Our First Choice”: Lottery Results

Despite all the time and resources participants invested into this process, the results were not guaranteed and each family received very different results. As such, they each had different responses to the lottery results as well. During the beginning of summer 2020, Evelyn said that “we got our first choice. We’re going to Malibu Campus

A, which is right up the hill from our house.” Since her family had gotten into their first choice, her path was the most straightforward of the mothers. Evelyn was fortunate, as she said that “a lot of them [her friends] are waitlisted at the school that they would prefer to go to.” Evelyn said this was because these families pursued popular schools that had high waitlists.

Layla’s family got into Springfield, which was a lower choice on their lottery application. Her family was not excited because “it doesn’t have language.... They have like very strict uniforms.” Ultimately, they decided that they did not like the choice they received. Layla’s family was placed on the waitlist for both the Westview campuses. For Westview Campus A, they were “waiting list number like 200” and for Campus B they were “waiting list number 17.” Layla recognized that she would not get into Campus A and that she “may have to enroll in Springfield and still just kind of keep hoping.” Layla expressed some frustration over how people come off the waitlists and how “there’s some schools where like 20 people get in off the waiting list. I’m like, you have 32 spots, how do you have people come in? I don’t understand that part of it.” By the summer Layla’s family was still feeling apprehensive about the lottery and she wanted to know what her chances were of getting into Westview. She said, “It’s awful. Like, I wish that they could tell me, ‘Look, we’ve already gotten, you know, all the people we’re supposed to register registered.’” Layla admitted to checking the results “obsessively,” but there was also confusion about how the numbers changed because there were times when she was moving down the waitlist (her waitlist position was going up) and she wondered, “Why is

the number going up?” Regardless, her approach was to stick it out and keep trying to get into Westview.

Sara’s approach to this process relied on playing the lottery over and over. Taking advantage of schools’ sibling preference, she ranked both of her sons differently to help her chances at getting into preferred schools. Sara’s “youngest matched at the school that my oldest currently attends. And my oldest was waitlisted at every school that I lotteried for him to get into.” Therefore, Sara “inserted a postlottery application” and “was offered a seat at two additional schools for both kids.” The two schools where her kids were accepted were Simmons Charter, a public charter, and Tufts, but she turned both of them down. She turned down Simmons Charter because “the distance will be kind of hard to deal with, [or] do, with two toddlers who may be testy in the morning.” She turned down Tufts because she “was concerned about how they’re going to deal with class sizes in light of COVID.”

During the summer, her tentative decision was to “keep them both enrolled at Salem,” which was the school that her oldest son had attended the previous year. However, she was still “waiting to see how things shake out at schools that I prefer.” When asked about her preferred schools, she said Robious and Canterbury. Both schools are public charter schools and had racial balances that Sara mentioned that she wanted (both schools were about 40% Black). Both schools were also very competitive. For Robious, there was a waitlist of about 500; Canterbury was less competitive, as there was a waitlist of almost 400. This followed the rationale she gave earlier, which was to place the more desired schools higher on the rankings. Sara used the sibling preference to

increase her chance of getting into one of these two schools by placing them both on the lottery applications.

Both were waitlisted during the summer before the 2020–21 school year, but with different numbers. Her oldest son, who was entering PK4, was “number 30 for Canterbury. And I think a number of 55 for Robious.” Her youngest son, who would be entering PK3, was “16 at Robious. And the number of Canterbury is in the hundreds, or close to 100.” Sara clarified that “the way it works is if my oldest son gets a seat at Canterbury, because his current number I think I just said number 30, then my youngest son moves up the list.” She felt that “the only way I would leave Salem is if I got into any of these two schools.” She felt comfortable at Salem not only because it was close to where she lived, but also because she was happy with the way that the school provided services for her older son, which is “one of the reasons I will only leave Salem for two schools that I think are significantly better.”

“We're So Close”: Enrollment for the 2020–21 School Year

Between the beginning of summer 2020 and the start of the 2020–21 school year, as the COVID-19 pandemic raged on, Layla and Sara both experienced changes in their schooling options. Layla’s persistence and Sara’s changing preferences highlight the more salient factors that these mothers were looking for in preschools. Layla was still waiting for seats at Westview because of that school’s language immersion and feeder schools. One of the preferences Sara had at the beginning of this process was a school that supported both of her sons’ special needs. This preference strengthened over the summer after her youngest son received an IEP.

During the summer before the academic year began, Layla's son was accepted off the waitlist for Malibu Campus A, which was the same school that Evelyn's daughter was attending. Malibu Campus A was the sixth school on Layla's original list. Even though Malibu Campus A was one of the schools that she liked, she was still waiting for a spot at Westview because she was close to getting into one of the Westview campuses: "The last time that I checked was last night. Because I checked multiple times a day, and it was four for Spanish and seven for French." Her family still liked Malibu, but "we're so close at Westview, and it just feels stressful... and we just like don't know what's gonna happen, we don't know when it's gonna happen." She said that Malibu is "a really good school" but "there's just two crucial things they don't have: they don't have language and then they don't have a feeder school."

Meanwhile, Sara had enrolled her two sons at Northeastern at the beginning of the school year. Northeastern is a public charter school that was not very competitive. Northeastern was one of the schools that she added in her postlottery application and was listed number six. The sibling preference process worked for Sara: "My youngest got in first. And then they made my oldest an offer based on the sibling preference." When asked whether her older son was accepted immediately, she said it "took a few weeks" and that "it wasn't too stressful because when the other son got accepted my oldest son automatically went to number one on their waitlist." She made the decision to enroll them in Northeastern because "they really do work a lot with children who have special needs." She further stated that an issue was "IEPs for speech, that my youngest has a lot of issues, a little bit more severe. So I wanted him to be able to go to a school that I

thought would support that.” While proximity was a stated priority in prior conversations, Sara’s commute was “about 15 to 20 minutes so it’s a lot longer than I would like to have done. But I felt like the service that they offer made it work, you know, made the sacrifice.” Sara was willing to make this extra drive because when her youngest son got his IEP, she “wanted him to be in an environment where they have specialists who were on staff, as opposed to, you know, rotating.” She said that she felt comfortable with Northeastern at this point because “that’s their specialty is to help...students [who] have special needs.”

Since Evelyn received a slot in her preferred school, there were no changes for her and her family during this time. Evelyn was happy with Malibu Campus A at the beginning of the school year. She said the school had done a “great job of kind of acquainting us to, to everything. They, they made the decision to go virtual before DCPS made the decision.” She liked how Malibu focused on racial equity “and like acknowledging the racial violence that’s been going on, has been, like, it’s really affirmed our decision to go there.” While acknowledging her own privilege, Evelyn said that the pandemic “compounds like the haves and have nots” and described how Malibu was sensitive to how the pandemic was affecting families. For example, Malibu was sensitive to the fact that kids were at home and “whether or not cameras should be required for in-person learning. If students don’t feel comfortable showing their home with a space that they’re working in.”

“Who Knows What This Year Is Gonna Look Like”: How the COVID-19 Pandemic Impacted Preschool Planning

The COVID-19 pandemic was a concern for the mothers well before the beginning of the school year, with all three wondering what school was going to look like. Layla was considering whether to send her son to school in light of the pandemic if they did not get into Westview. Because PK3 was “child care adjacent...to me, it doesn’t seem worth the risk to send him to a school we don’t necessarily like but whereas if it’s for instance Malibu or Westview, then to me it becomes worth it.” At this point she had gotten into only Springfield, which was the school that required uniforms that she did not like. Therefore, there was some dissonance around whether to send her son to a school that she did not like. Her decision was tied to managing her chances of getting into Westview, where she said, “I’d do it. If we got into Westview in October, I’m going.” However, she did not feel as strongly if her son stayed enrolled at Springfield, saying that with COVID “it still feels unsafe” and that she wanted him “to be in the school that we like. I’m not as pressed to have him in school in general.” Sara had similar thoughts of uncertainty, and she was considering staying at the school that her oldest son had attended last year just for some stability. She said, “Who knows what this year is gonna look like. And I don’t know if I’m mentally and emotionally—the, the bandwidth to do a whole lot of changing right now. Sometimes it’s just easier to go with what you know.” For her, this meant possibly just having both of her sons attend Salem, the school her oldest had attended last year. This decision was likely made easier knowing that she was happy with the IEP services at Salem and her younger son would likely receive the same services. Sara felt like there was still time to “school up,” and she felt like “PK is a time

where it's less important, but as they move into kindergarten I would like them to be into a better school."

In anticipation of the upcoming school year, Layla knew that she would need some child care support because at the beginning of the summer schools were communicating with parents about the academic school year and were offering two options: staying remote or going to a hybrid model. In either case, Layla knew that they needed help caring for their son, so during the summer they got an au pair. This au pair stayed with them through about the first half of the school year. While Layla had an au pair to help with child care and schooling, Evelyn initially went through the summer with her and her husband caring for their daughter themselves. However, once school began, they needed more support so they started a school pod with another family.

Evelyn said her family considered putting "her back to daycare if the schools closed. But because of, one, the attendance requirement and then, two, because, like, looking at the daycare situation we weren't really comfortable with sending her back," they started a "school pod with her best friend who is in her class at school." The school pod teacher was "attending...at-home trainings that we have through the school" and "then basically it'll be like a nanny share, essentially, except she'll be working on educating the kids." Evelyn acknowledged that the cost is "an arm and a leg" but "it was really the only option for us." Because Malibu was their preferred school, they had to "attend school in order to keep your spot, even if it's virtual." Evelyn was referring to the school's attendance requirement and how if her daughter did not attend during the day she would be disenrolled.

Meanwhile, Sara was juggling two preschoolers' virtual education at Northeastern Charter, whose classes were "at the same time. So it's, you know, I'm running back and forth between two kids." This was unsustainable for her, so she used "the emergency sick leave provision under Cares Act...and that's 80 hours of sick leave so instead of taking two full, you know, two 40-hour weeks, I'm doing 20 hours a week for a month." This was in September. Thinking ahead to October, she "applied for and they've been accepted to a private preschool." While she was still unsure at this point whether she would sign the contract and enroll them in the private preschool, she acknowledged "that might have to be the option that I take the rest of school year because I can't, I can't maintain the schedule....They're on at the same time." When asked what would happen to her sons' placement at Northeastern if she enrolled them in a private preschool, she said, "I will probably lose it [her sons' spot at Northeastern]." She further said, "If we lose our spot, we just lose our spot. I mean lottery comes up again in December. So we're just, you know, we'll lottery again, either for Northeastern or another school." She said that Northeastern was "not a horrible school but it's not the best either, so it's right in the middle and I feel pretty confident that we could get in again next year." During this interview it was uncertain how schools would count enrollment for preschoolers. Ideally Sara wanted to "keep our spot" at Northeastern if school were to return "in a few weeks," but she also needed to weigh if she enrolled her sons in the private preschool they may already be "settled" in that time. At this point, Sara felt more confident in private preschools staying open than DC Public Schools "because they also have a daycare license." As such, while this situation was stressful for Sara, she still had a backup option

of paying for private preschool. Losing her spot at Northeastern seemed less of a concern since she felt that she could just play the lottery again.

Later in spring 2021, during the last interview, Sara said that she had “unenrolled them in Northeastern and enrolled them in a private preschool.” There were two reasons for this. First, she was not worried about losing her spot at Northeastern because she did not think it was competitive to get into. Sara mentioned that Northeastern initially “kept changing the plans for reopening,” so she kept her children enrolled at Northeastern during the fall while they were also attending the private preschool even though her sons were not participating in Northeastern. She was “hoping that they would reopen in person at some point. And it just kept getting pushed back pushed back pushed back. And finally, I realized, you know, there’s no point.” When asked whether there was concern about losing her spot, she said no but “if they were at a school that, you know, didn’t take as many children, I would have done what I need to do to keep the spot.” Second, she said that her sons “were also doing so well at their in-person school so I knew I made the right decision.”

“Back At It”: Playing the Lottery Again

The COVID-19 pandemic caused such disruptions for these mothers and their children, with their lottery processes and starting preschool occurring in 2020. A change occurred for each mother, and all three were playing the lottery again. Layla’s family had moved to Northwest and they were “back at it,” “still applying for Westview Campus A because they never got in during the current school year. Despite moving to another neighborhood, Layla’s family thought it was still important that they go to Westview.

When asked why she re-entered the lottery even though she does not live near Westview, she said, “Diversity. The language immersion. Those are the main things, the schools around here are a lot less diverse.” When asked about diversity in her new area, she said, “We now have a very good school as our area school, which is Ballard Elementary School. And it’s, I think, it’s, I think it’s like 8% Black. And yeah, just like for DC like that doesn’t seem representative.” Ballard is a traditional public school that was relatively difficult to get into. In addition, as Layla noted, the school had a much lower percentage of Black students. Almost 75% of the students were White, and around 10% were Black. This persistence to get into Westview demonstrates Layla’s desire for a language immersion school, but also the value she placed on diversity. Despite being in a wealthier area and having a neighborhood school with higher scores where she could have used neighborhood school preferences, she still elected to try to get into Westview.

Evelyn, meanwhile, was playing the lottery again because her family was considering foster adopting a child, “and if we do that, we would be looking at an older child. And Malibu doesn’t have space for older children.” This created a problem for Evelyn’s family because they liked Malibu, but Malibu did not have grades that would enable them to use the sibling preference for an older child. In this sense, “it doesn’t help us to be at Malibu.” They played the lottery again to try to get her daughter in a school that offers later grades, and then they could use her enrollment to use a sibling preference to get their adopted child into that school. Evelyn did not remember all the schools that she had put on the current lottery application, but they looked “at schools that had like strong emotional behavioral programs.” They also knew that their neighborhood school,

Arbor Heights Elementary, was not an option because it is “one of the worst schools in DC.” Evelyn said that they “looked at private schools, and that’s the more likely option. Like we would probably just send that child to private school.” In this scenario, her daughter would stay at Malibu and they would pay for their adopted child to go to a private school. Evelyn said that “we did look at another, like a private Montessori school that could accept them both. But that’s an option. But it’s so expensive. I don’t know if we would actually do it.” It was unclear what the outcome would be for Evelyn since she had not yet adopted a child. However, she had the financial means to pay for private school if needed and the institutional knowledge around the lottery to make the best decisions for her family.

Sara seemed to change the most based on her experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic as her thoughts about what was most important shifted to focusing on her sons’ love of learning, which she had not mentioned in previous interviews. When asked about her plans for next year, Sara said she played the lottery again. However, she did not reapply for Northeastern but instead “put one school, which was Tufts. Because it’s a pretty easy school to get into all the other Montessori schools.” For this lottery, Sara was not worried about just putting one school because she considered that she would “put it in one school so if it works out great. If it doesn’t, my older son will go to a local school and my younger son could continue at the parochial school that he is in right now.” Tufts was one of the schools from her list from the previous year. It is a public charter school that was not competitive. The pandemic had changed Sara’s thinking and approach to her sons’ education. She said that “this entire process of, you know, pandemic and schools

being closed helped me realize that my expectations of what the school is, is a lot less important than my children's enjoyment of school." Sara seemed to question some of her considerations from earlier in the process and instead wanted her kids to "love learning. I don't want them to look at school as a place they have to go." This was an important pivot point for her, as she began to question whether her prior concerns were what was most important for her sons' happiness in the classroom, saying that she needed to "put aside" some of her concerns as a parent. Another thing that helped shift her emphasis was that "my youngest really loves school. He absolutely first thing in the morning, he's ready to go." While she acknowledged that Tufts had "horrible test scores," she posited that "I don't think that's necessarily a reflection that the kids aren't learning, they just aren't being taught to the test." Sara also felt confident in her ability to intervene "if by second or third grade they are not where I think they should be, then you know I can pull them and look into other options, but I want to give it a try." As in previous interviews, she did feel confident in her ability to get her sons the services they needed in the upcoming school year, commute was still important, and she still felt that if she was not satisfied with their learning by second or third grade she could make additional changes.

Support for her sons' disabilities was one of Sara's primary considerations through this process. Her sons were not getting any services through the private preschool in which they were enrolled, and Sara was "looking at private speech and occupational therapy, especially for my oldest." She was hopeful that school would reopen next school year so that they could "get back on track." Regarding Tufts, Sara said that she had "spoken with the special education director there to find out their process" for handling

existing IEPs. She said that she was “ready to advocate for whatever the, my kids need” at Tufts and that she thought “that they are going to do the entire assessment all over again. Which actually you know it makes sense because children have technically been out of school for more than a year now.” She also said that Tufts was “a little over a mile maybe a mile and a half, so 10 minutes on a bad day,” which indicates that the school was going to be a good commute for her.

Layla, Sara, and Evelyn were all participating in the lottery again as of spring 2021. Despite all the time that this process took, and moving to an area with a better school, Layla was still seeking a seat at Westview for her son. Meanwhile, Evelyn’s situation was changing in light of her family possibly becoming foster parents. Sara was participating again because she had to disenroll her two sons from Northeastern because of COVID’s impact on virtual schooling. The pandemic was a disruption for all families, causing Evelyn’s family to start a school pod, Layla’s family to hire an au pair, and Sara to enroll her sons in a private preschool. The time and effort expended in the lottery process helped them increase their chances of getting into their preferred schools and navigate the shocks of the pandemic. However, their precarious status remained unchanged at the time of the last interviews. Layla was still trying to get into Westview (although in a later correspondence she said her son had finally been offered a place at Westview). While Evelyn was happy with her daughter’s school, it ended in second grade and did not extent to later grades. And Sara was still looking for a school for her sons, who had not been receiving services for their IEPs. These parents had the requisite capital

to make informed choices about the lottery, but in the end, they were playing the lottery again.

Chapter Seven: Discussion

The current study followed three upper-middle-class mothers as they navigated a preschool choice lottery in Washington, DC. Participants' processes were shaped by their race and social class position. Previous studies examined the impact that middle-class (mostly White) families have on urban schools in the form of school gentrification as well as how families use class-based knowledge to gain advantage through informal rules in school choice decisions (Lareau et al., 2016; Posey-Maddox, 2014). Research has not focused on how families navigated lotteries specifically, nor has it documented racial differences in these processes.

The findings from this study represent an example of policy failure. Through qualitative interviews with parents and quantitative waitlist data, this study provides insight into the ways in which DC's common enrollment lottery may contribute to the maintenance of race and social class inequalities through lottery preferences and a "shadow system of informal rules" (Lareau et al., 2016, p. 289). In doing so, this system privileges homeowners in the western areas of the city who already have access to good schools. By its own rating system (DC STAR scores), DC has higher quality schools in the northwestern areas of the city. These areas are Whiter, wealthier, and more educated, suggesting at the ward level there is neighborhood segregation. Wards 7 and 8, those east of the Anacostia River, are predominately Black and have a significantly lower median

household income. The DC common enrollment lottery, through school neighborhood and proximity preferences, limits the opportunities for families living in poorer or more Black areas to access higher rated traditional public schools. These findings suggest that the lottery may reproduce neighborhood segregation in schools and are consistent with studies in contexts that did not have common enrollment lotteries. Sattin-Bajaj and Roda (2020), in their study of New York City schools, found that similar neighborhood and proximity preferences limited the options for parents who were zoned for less coveted schools.

What must parents do to access good schools in other areas of DC? This study demonstrated how structural constraints impacted the three mothers' decision making but also how these mothers utilized their own capital to identify and rank desired schools. The school lottery website advised parents to simply rank schools in the order of their preference, but the mothers in this study described informal rules that they learned through their cultural and navigational capital: (1) Don't waste lottery picks on good traditional public schools that have neighborhood and proximity preferences, and 2) don't choose schools that have large waitlists every year. All three mothers referenced hearing of other parents who did not match to any of the schools listed on their lottery applications because they did not know these two informal rules. These mothers' choices were limited by where they lived, so they had to consider their own preferences for schools (e.g., language immersion), weigh the constraints placed on them through lottery preferences, and strategically rank possible schools on their lottery applications. This was a time-consuming process that is far more complex than advertised.

Despite the time these families spent researching schools, they were still participating in the lottery the following school year. There was also the emotional labor expended in searching for schools with the best fit, waiting for the lottery results, and strategizing about how to rank schools on lottery applications. As such, researchers and policymakers must ask: Whom do these common enrollment lottery systems serve? Are lottery systems the most efficient way to help families access high-quality schools? In this study, the lottery seemed to perpetuate exclusionary practices via housing and economic segregation while giving the allure of equal access to all schools for participating parents.

While this study's participants were three upper-middle-class mothers, race also played a central role in the types of schools these three mothers looked for and considered. In this way, the study demonstrated initial evidence of systemic racism in navigating the school choice lottery. Other research has identified how families of color monitor schools for racial bias (Brown, 2021; Lareau et al., 2021). This study found similar results for the mothers in the sample. The two Black mothers in this study shared that they preferred diverse school environments where their children of color would be welcome. Layla cautioned at one point that sometimes there is a belief among school staff that Black children would need extra help. This created an additional burden for these two families. Not only were they selecting schools based on academic scores, but they also had to consider whether schools would provide an accepting school environment for their minority children. Evelyn, a White mother, was sincere in her desire to have her daughter attend a diverse school reflective of the broader

neighborhood, but she did not worry about school staff mistreating her daughter because of the color of her skin.

The current study also draws on the early care and education (ECE) decision-making literature and connects it to the broader school choice literature to understand preschool choice. ECE decision making is a complex process that is informed by parental beliefs and available arrangements (Weber, 2011). In Washington, DC, preschools were connected to later grades and mothers were not thinking just about preschools, but about elementary and feeder schools also. In many ways, the DC context addressed many of the challenges confronting parents in other areas of the United States where preschool is not available in public schools. For example, a recent report cited the cost of care as a barrier to finding ECE (Cui & Natzke, 2021). This barrier was not present for the participants in this study, but other barriers were prohibitive, such as school preferences and proximity to home.

The following sections lay out the research contributions from this study in more detail by first focusing on school choice and preschool choice. This section links prior literature on school segregation and accessing quality schools through lottery systems and then moves on to identifying similarities between the school choice literature and the ECE decision-making literature. Next, theoretical contributions are discussed in terms of how school choice studies must focus on the intersectionality of race and class. This study reiterated that both identities are key to understanding parents' positionality and how they approach school selection (Lareau et al., 2016; Pattillo, 2015). Next, the section on implications for policy and practice provides suggestions on how the findings from

this study can inform lottery processes, particularly in terms of moving toward equity of experience for families across racial and class backgrounds. The chapter ends with a discussion on limitations, strengths, and areas for future research.

Research Contributions

School Choice

School admission requirements vary greatly across different school choice contexts, and the processes for enrollment can be complex (Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020). Some school choice systems have different admission and enrollment rules for each sector (Lareau et al., 2016), and other contexts have additional neighborhood and proximity preferences (Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020). While school choice decision making is a time-intensive effort (Brown, 2021), the creation of common enrollment lotteries was meant to simplify this effort (Gross et al., 2015). Amazingly, little research has studied how information around school choice rules and admission requirements may produce inequitable outcomes in school choice decisions. No study to date has examined how parents navigate preschool or K–12 common enrollment lottery systems and how these lotteries impact the schools to which parents apply. Families enrolling in public preschool programs in Washington, DC, have to participate in the common enrollment lottery by listing up to 12 schools on lottery applications. DC Public Schools advised families to rank schools in the order of their preferences. The families did that, but with some important caveats.

Previous research found that school choice systems have informal rules that benefit families who have the cultural and navigational capital to identify them (Lareau et

al., 2016). For this study, these informal rules made the three participants more reliant on charter schools since they did not live in areas with good traditional public schools. This finding was supported in the public use data in this study, which indicated more charter schools in Wards 7 and 8, where the schools had lower STAR ratings. Conversely, the popular schools these families referenced were in the western part of the city, where schools had higher STAR ratings, had higher percentages of White students, and accepted fewer students off waitlists.

The findings also represent how the DC common enrollment lottery as a policy does not help parents access more popular schools in the western areas of the city. School choice in DC still closely links neighborhoods with schools through neighborhood and proximity school preferences. In theory, the DC common enrollment lottery gave participants the opportunity to enroll in schools other than their traditional neighborhood schools. However, in practice, the pool of schools these participants could choose from was limited because the traditional public schools had neighborhood and proximity preferences. For higher ranked schools in western areas of DC, these school preferences served as gatekeepers precluding students from other areas from enrolling. New York City has similar neighborhood and proximity preferences in its school choice system, and parents there also feel limited in their school choice options (Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020). On the other hand, families living in neighborhoods with already strong schools could use those as safety schools while still playing the lottery for other popular schools. This means that the neighborhood and proximity preferences legitimize the reproduction of neighborhood segregation via school choice policy. Families are told to rank schools in

the order of their preference, but the odds of getting into the popular traditional public schools in the western areas of DC are low for families who do not live in these areas. This left these families reliant on charter schools.

Race and racism were important factors in the selection of preschools for participants in this study. Earlier studies found that Black parents considered whether their children of color would be welcome in certain settings (Brown, 2021). The two Black mothers in this study experienced similar burdens of concern. They looked at schools not only for whether they aligned with preferences, but also for whether they would feel comfortable sending their racial minority children there. This was not a consideration for Evelyn, the White mother in the study. Evelyn wanted diversity as a matter of preference rather than necessity. She did not mention considering whether her daughter would be treated differently in the schools because of her social class or race.

Previous research indicated that the school characteristics that middle-class Black families were looking for were in short supply (Lareau et al., 2021). The pool of schools that the two Black mothers in this study considered was reduced given their preferences for a mix of races where their children would feel welcome. Even when Layla, who moved to a wealthier area with higher performing schools, noted that her new neighborhood school was not representative of the city, and therefore she was still looking at Westview.

Previous studies of ECE decisions described preferences for ECE that children receive, such as reliability and safe environments with child-centered teaching practices (Coley et al., 2014; Davis & Connelly, 2005; Gamble et al., 2009). This study certainly

showed this as each family had specific preferences for ECE. All three mothers looked for diverse school settings, but Evelyn looked for inclusive school environments when going to open houses, Sara wanted school environments to support her sons' special needs, and Layla wanted language immersion. However, final ECE decisions are often decided within a broader set of considerations that may be at odds with these preferences, and there is a distinction between preferences that families have for care and the deciding factors that families use to make their final decisions (Meyers & Jordan, 2006; Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012). DC's advice to parents to rank schools in the order of their preference ignores this distinction between preferences and constraints.

Participants in this study had preferences for preschools, but they had to weigh these preferences against barriers and constraints before deciding which schools to rank on their lottery applications. For example, Layla wanted language immersion, but the schools she could realistically choose from were local charter schools because she lived in an area with undesirable traditional public schools. Sara wanted schools that would support her sons' special needs, but she also thought about cost of aftercare and proximity to her home.

The COVID-19 pandemic occurred throughout this study, which provided a unique opportunity to examine how the pandemic impacted preschool choice and enrollment. Research has shown that there was a decrease in ECE providers during the pandemic (Child Care Aware of America, 2020). The preschools in DC did not formally close, but they did move to virtual instruction. While this was a challenging time for all families, participants in this study had the economic resources to navigate the pandemic.

Evelyn began a school pod for her daughter, Layla hired an au pair to supplement child care, and Sara, although she struggled at first with virtual schooling for her two preschool sons, ultimately enrolled them in a private preschool. Sara felt the impact of the pandemic most acutely given that she had to change schools, but her sons also went without individualized education plan services during this time, which could impact their learning as they enter kindergarten.

Quality schools were also important for the parents in this study. Quality in ECE is two pronged and includes structural features of the arrangement (e.g., child-to-teacher ratios, teacher education) and process aspects of quality (e.g., caregiver warmth, activities in the classroom; Forry, Tout, et al., 2013). It is usually difficult for parents to assess measures of quality (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997). While not a perfect measure of ECE quality, parents in the study at least had DC STAR scores that they could reference, and this was one indicator of referencing what good schools were.

The mothers in this study discussed good schools in terms of diverse school environments as well. Layla stated that there were some good public charter schools where she lived, but these schools were not perceived by other parents as good schools because the racial composition of the student populations was majority Black. This was confirmed by Evelyn, who spoke of parents transferring out of schools that had majorities of Black students. This finding suggests how racist attitudes of other parents participating in the lottery can perpetuate racial segregation within these choice systems. As previous research has shown that Black families cannot always find the diverse school settings they desire (Lareau, 2021), future research should explore the extent to which this is due

to decisions made by White parents in choice systems. Such research will help policymakers and researchers better understand the lingering causes of school segregation.

Ironically, the mothers in this study did not worry about quality for preschool as much as they did for later grades. Despite an abundance of research supporting the importance of early childhood education on later outcomes (for an overview, see Heckman, 2006), the mothers in this study downplayed the importance of preschool, perhaps in response to the level of effort expended on the lottery process. Their focus for the most part was on the later elementary years and beyond. The importance of preschool in this setting was not so much getting children in as much as securing seats in schools for the future. All three mothers expressed some questions about how important preschool was for their child's development, with Layla questioning at what age schooling matters and Sara saying that children would be all right going to a one-star school. The lottery itself may have impacted these views as the mothers may have been questioning whether the stress and anxiety created by the lottery was needed. However, these findings support the findings from Kimelberg (2014), who found that middle-class mothers believed they had the cultural capital to supplement lack of quality instruction in kindergarten and therefore did not place much weight on test scores.

An abundance of information was provided to families by DC Public Schools, including at a school fair, but the three upper-middle-class mothers in this study still relied heavily on informal sources of information and what other parents said. Unlike previous reports and studies that suggest the important differences in class-based use of

personal networks in finding information (e.g., Horvat et al., 2003; Iruka & Carver, 2006), these mothers relied heavily on their own research through online listservs and neighborhood groups and attendance at open houses. Evaluating school settings through open houses was an important component to identifying preschools that were a good fit. Evelyn looked at how school staff interacted with one another, Layla was turned off by staff who seemed like they did not want to be there, and Sara described some environments as unwelcoming. In these instances, mothers were evaluating schools and school staff.

Theoretical Contributions

Understanding how neighborhood and proximity preferences work in tandem with typical waitlists for popular schools was critical for the mothers in the sample as they considered which schools to place on their lottery applications. These types of shadow systems were identified in another school choice context that did not have common enrollment applications (Lareau et al., 2016). While none of the mothers lived in neighborhoods with good traditional public schools, they understood the likelihood of getting into a highly rated traditional public school in another area was too small and not worth considering, and all three knew of parents who did not match at any schools in prior lotteries. This information is not part of the recommendations that the DC school lottery offers parents, which illustrates how the concepts of social, cultural, and navigational capital are important analytic tools to understanding school choice decision making.

Cultural capital theory seeks to explain the mechanisms used to maintain socioeconomic power in institutional settings through information and knowledge (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). This is what Lareau et al. (2016, p. 280) referred to as the “rules of the game,” arguing that parent behaviors have different meanings across different contexts. Families who have greater access to this information are at a distinct advantage in navigating school environments where coveted opportunities are scarce. It also allows families who are in positions of power to maintain that power in seemingly legitimate ways. Yosso's (2005, p. 70) community cultural wealth theory centers race in the debate about the capital that families have. Specifically, Yosso's theory focuses on “on the experiences of People of Color in critical historical context reveals accumulated assets and resources in the histories and lives of Communities of Color” (p. 77).

In the current study, knowing the informal rules of the preschool lottery allowed participants to not “waste” their lottery picks on schools that they had no chance of getting into. In this way, they would not be like other families they referenced that “were completely shut out of the lottery.” The moment this information becomes widely available, the information is no longer useful and becomes less prestigious, less useful knowledge (Lareau, 2011). However, race and social class simultaneously impact the experiences of families and students as they navigate complex institutions such as schools. Cultural capital helps explain how social class status shapes how families can use their knowledge of schools to identify shadow systems of informal rules, while navigational capital helps to understand how families of color navigate racist systems. And yet, despite all their accumulated cultural and navigational capital, these mothers

still did not feel like they had access to the most desirable schools because of where they lived. This shows the importance of structural inequities in housing, the limits of cultural and navigational capital, and how information about informal rules may not always secure desired outcomes.

This study also illustrated, particularly among the two Black participants, the delicate interplay between race and class in school choice. All three mothers in this study were solidly upper middle class. They had advanced professional degrees with jobs that allowed a great deal of autonomy and were aware of the informal rules needed to better their chances to securing a seat in their preferred schools. Layla, one of the Black mothers, acknowledged that as an attorney she was privileged. She also moved during the course of the year to another neighborhood that was composed predominantly of White families and had a high median household income. But Layla as a Black mother also had to deal with navigating a policy system that maintained systemic racial and economic segregation. She was aware of the impact gentrification had on her own chances of getting her son into a preferred school. She stated how White parents often have access to better resourced schools. These are examples of systemic racism, and no matter how much cultural capital she had, as a Black mother she had to navigate the lottery system with her race as a factor in school decisions. Sara, while also upper middle class, was evaluating whether some schools would provide welcoming environments for her minority children, which is an example of the navigational capital that families of color utilize as they navigate school settings (Valenzuela, 1999; Yosso, 2005). Here, Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth better explains how parents of color, even with

privilege, must navigate school lotteries in contexts where they fear racial discrimination for their children.

These results underscore the need for more studies focusing on the intersectionality between race and class in ECE and family research (Hill Collins, 2019). As mentioned above, cultural capital literature focuses on social class while community wealth studies focus on race and ethnicity. While the two Black mothers in this study had the requisite cultural capital to identify the informal rules of the lottery, they limited the schools they were looking at based on whether their children would be welcome in majority-White school environments. While Evelyn, a White upper-middle-class mother, was focused on racial equity, she did not have to worry about her daughter being discriminated against in school settings.

Implications for Practice and Policy

This study has implications for both common enrollment lottery systems and children's early care and education. This section describes how changes to the DC lottery system could benefit marginalized communities who are participating in the lottery and then moves to focus on what information was used in considering preschools and how to reduce parental anxiety around the lottery process.

Lottery Preferences

The current DC school lottery preferences benefit families who live in higher resourced areas. This makes getting into better traditional public schools via the lottery difficult. Even though charter schools do not have neighborhood and proximity preferences, families who live in areas that already have good neighborhood schools

apply to charters. This gives these families a double advantage—they already have good neighborhood schools that they can use as a backup, so they can apply to popular charters with little risk, knowing that they are comfortable with their neighborhood schools. Other researchers have also demonstrated how already privileged parents use school choice systems to their advantage. Roda and Wells (2013) interviewed White upper-middle-class families who went through a kindergarten school choice lottery in a district in New York City, and while their participants did not enroll in any neighborhood schools, they used their resources to enroll in coveted public gifted and talented programs or private schools. None of the three mothers in the current study could risk putting all the popular charters on their lottery applications because they did not have the good traditional public schools as backups.

The most direct way to address this issue would be to remove the neighborhood and proximity preferences and create a pure lottery process. New Orleans has a common enrollment lottery that is similar to DC's and does not have schools that families are automatically enrolled in, but students must travel farther to get to school (Dreilinger, 2014). However, the families in the current study wanted schools near where they lived. Another way to address this issue could be to give preference to applicants based on family background characteristics and which ward the family lives in. Weighting applicants in lotteries by certain background characteristics to give them a better chance at getting into coveted schools is one possibility. It was clear from interviews with the three mothers, and the quantitative data, that living in Wards 7 and 8 provided less opportunity for getting into the more desirable schools in DC. Adding a specific lottery

preference for Ward 7 and 8 residents would increase families' chances of getting into more popular schools and also more directly address the economic and racial segregation in these Wards. DC is already moving in this direction. For the 2021–22 school year, charter schools began giving preference to “at-risk students,” and for the 2022–23 school year, this preference will be extended to nine charter and traditional public schools (Asbury, 2021). However, more could be done to integrate the schools by also including race as a preference or establishing racial quotas in schools.

Perhaps most importantly, policymakers and researchers should question the utility of these lottery systems and how they are implemented. There was a large emotional cost to the participants in this study, absorbed as they were in navigating this process. They spent time researching schools, strategizing how to rank their lottery applications, and worrying about waitlists for improbable outcomes. In the end, all three study participants ended up playing the lottery again. Policymakers and researchers must consider for whom these lottery systems are designed and whether tweaks to the existing system are enough or whether larger overhauls to the systems are necessary. As such, more research needs to be devoted to these policy-related implications in the future.

In particular, this research should question the extent to which lottery systems are a viable social policy to address access to quality schools. School quality must be viewed through the lens of systemic racism and divestment in minoritized areas. Residents of color are more likely than White residents to live in disinvested communities characterized by high poverty, less access to quality formal education, and less access to home ownership (Krysan et al., 2014). This disinvestment impacts schools, and the

school lottery does not address these systemic issues. This is highlighted by Layla's observation about the "clustering of White people at the better schools because they get in-boundary preference because they buy the expensive houses." The DC school lottery simply maintains these systemic inequities by limiting access to quality schools to a random draw for residents living in disinvested communities.

Sources of Information

A second way to improve the preschool lottery would be to improve the information accessible to parents by supporting informal networks. Vesely et al. (2013) found that preschool settings supported the social networks of parents that led to the formation of navigational capital in the form of parents learning about U.S. schools. In this study, determining best fit for schools was largely accomplished by research through online groups or listservs and attendance at open houses. None of the three mothers found the local school fair, DC EdFEST, valuable. They used information from the My School DC website to gather important information on school ratings and waitlist information but turned to listservs, parenting websites, and open houses for specific advice related to personal experiences, similar to what was used in others settings (Posey-Maddox, 2014). However, online platforms may not be easily accessible for lower income families, so facilitating other informal gatherings, perhaps around DC EdFEST, would help connect parents and further support family social networks. Another possibility is to utilize Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE; <https://dcpave.org>), a local parent advocacy organization, to help establish informal linkages between families to facilitate information sharing. PAVE's website already offers ward overviews and school fact

sheets by ward, but bolstering this organization's capacity to connect other parents could go a long way in helping parents navigate the complex lottery system.

Have DC Lottery Make Suggestions

The lottery process created anxiety for these mothers, which is supported by previous research that found school lotteries were stressful experiences for upper-middle-class families (Roda & Wells, 2013). This was particularly true for Layla, who admitted to creating a complex spreadsheet during the lottery process and checking the lottery results daily. Evelyn also mentioned that the options were overwhelming. It is not practical to think that families with less time and fewer resources could create spreadsheets and do all the research that these mothers performed during this process. One way the DC common enrollment lottery could improve would be to offer nearby school suggestions based on proximity to the household. Boston Public Schools does not offer neighborhood preferences and instead gives parents a list of nearby public schools with high-achieving options to choose from (*Boston Public Schools*, n.d.; Fong & Faude, 2018). This gives parents clear direction about their nearby options without them expending a great deal of effort. Additional information provided could include school sector (traditional public/charter) and other key information on topics such as waitlists and school preference—both of which were the guiding informal rules of this study. This could at least make more formal the informal rules the mothers in this study used and minimize the need for research for more local options.

Improving policies around lottery preferences specifically targeted for families who reside in Wards 7 and 8, improving information sources to include supporting

informal networks, and offering local school suggestions to reduce parental anxiety are three practical ways that the DC preschool lottery could be improved. This study showed that neighborhood preferences, reliance on informal networks, and parental worry over lottery results were prominent themes when speaking to the participating mothers. These three steps, if implemented, could reduce school segregation and simplify this process for all families.

Limitations and Strengths of the Study

The current study followed three mothers over the course of a year through a preschool lottery. Aligned with ethnography and case study methods, the smaller number of participants allowed for more depth in understanding the mothers' decision making over time and how the larger context of schools and wards in DC informed these decisions. The in-depth interviews over time meant that the sample was smaller and less diverse. A study interviewing parents at a single point in time, for example, may be able to obtain a larger sample with differing background characteristics, such as race, social class, and neighborhood location. For example, the mothers in this study speculated that families who live in areas with good schools can take more risks in applying for schools with long waitlists. It would be beneficial to interview some of these families to understand their lottery processes and experiences. Likewise, interviewing more families of color with lower socioeconomic positions would be worthwhile to better understand the role of race across different social class positions, their approaches to the lottery, how and where they obtained information, and which schools they listed on their applications.

Exploring these topics as a White male interviewer with children likely influenced how much of their stories these mothers shared. As mentioned earlier, I openly discussed my own children during the interviews to establish rapport with participants and to make them comfortable in sharing information. Based on their retention in my study and their voluntary communication in some instances, this approach worked. It is also possible that me being an outsider—I do not live in DC and presented my research as wanting to understand their strategies for selecting preschools—allowed these mothers to feel more comfortable sharing their experiences with me about their approaches to the preschool lottery process. These interviews took place not only during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also during the summer of 2020 when racial justice protests occurred throughout the United States over the death of George Floyd and others. Britton (2020) reflected on how her position as a White female researcher in England impacted her study of Muslim men in England. Her understanding of Pakistani culture allowed her to quickly build rapport with Pakistani women, while she minimized differences between herself and participants to gain trust and cooperation. In my study, the issues of race came out naturally in the conversations with these mothers. Lareau et al. (2021) noted in her research on Black middle-class families that in some interviews the African American interviewers were more quickly able to establish rapport with participants. While the mothers in my study seemed to easily share their thoughts on race, having additional interviewers of other races would have provided opportunities to explore these racial issues in more depth.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic was a unique opportunity to delve into how families responded to this historic event. This research project was approved on March

13, 2020, two days after the World Health Organization declared COVID a global pandemic (Katella, 2021). As such, recruitment relied on listserv announcements. The pandemic provided a rare opportunity to see how these three families activated their respective capital in response to this historic event in real time. This study followed parents as they were trying to make sense of information about virtual schooling and what schools were planning to do at the beginning of the 2020–21 school year. While the pandemic did not influence how these three families ranked schools, it did affect decision making about how to enroll students. For example, Layla did not initially get into her preferred school, and she and her wife discussed whether it was even worth enrolling their son in a school they did not like under the circumstances. Evelyn, meanwhile, got into her preferred school and started a school pod with another family to help manage virtual preschool while she and her husband managed their jobs. While the pandemic may be a onetime event, it offers a window into how these mothers were able to activate their requisite capital and respond to challenges.

However, the pandemic impacted the depth of the conversations with these women, and therefore some important details were missed. I first interviewed the mothers shortly after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, and the interviews occurred via phone or video calls. Opportunities to build rapport through face-to-face meetings were not possible, and therefore some important contextual information went missing in this study. For example, no questions were asked about family structure including marital status. Not being able to speak in person, and interview families in their own households or neighborhoods, deprived me of more natural ways to

ask about relationships and other household members. Moreover, my positionality as a White male distanced me from my participants in this respect, making me fearful of asking potentially sensitive questions that may have reduced participation.

There were also opportunities missed in not following up with respondents on some salient topics. For example, throughout the interviews the three mothers made reference to “good schools.” While they discussed good schools in the context of test scores, rankings, and school resources, I never pressed them on what they meant by that phrase. There were two reasons for this. First, a lack of interview experience probably contributed to me missing this key detail. Between interviews, I would review important topics. These topics would commonly be about which schools they were interested in and why. It was not clear until after my coding that I missed the opportunity to explore what parents meant by “good schools” relative to what policymakers think of as good schools. The second reason is also related to the pandemic. These mothers had limited windows of opportunity in which to talk to me. After the first interview, I tried to keep interviews two through four to about 30 minutes in order to not burden these mothers in the middle of an unprecedented pandemic. This meant limiting questions. In hindsight, this also meant not being able to fully problematize the conceptualization of good schools in the study.

Areas for Future Research

The design of the current study, and the data utilized, offered a unique look at how mothers adapted to neighborhood and proximity preferences in the lottery process. The DC lottery system is organized around specific school preferences and exacerbates constraints related to proximity to preferred schools. Neighborhood and proximity school

preferences are important gatekeepers that prevented the three mothers from applying for more desirable public schools. These families could have run the risk of not getting matched anywhere if they had not been aware of how the school preference system worked to their disadvantage.

More Diverse Samples

This study used longitudinal interview data in addition to quantitative descriptive data on waitlists, school ratings, and acceptance rates to corroborate the structural constraints that the three mothers navigated as they were going through the lottery process. The quantitative data confirm the barriers to good schools that these mothers described. Higher quality schools (in the form of DC STAR ratings), longer waitlists, and lower acceptance rates of traditional public schools were all found in the western areas of the district, where the schools had higher percentages of White students. As mentioned earlier, future research should include more diverse sets of families from different locales throughout the city. Research is needed in other areas that also use lotteries to consider how other families navigate these systems. These systems are context specific, and identifying both the similarities and differences in how parents respond to them is important.

Utilizing Quantitative Data

Examining family choices within a larger data set would also provide information about preschool choice in the district. A recent report analyzing preschool lottery data from DC published by the Urban Institute (Greenberg et al., 2020) found that a higher percentage of families were matched for PK3 than PK4. This is likely due to the fact that

PK3 seats are most available, and after that families are vying for spots only when children leave. The report also found that boundary and sibling preferences were used to obtain school matches, which was consistent with the findings from this study. However, more research is needed using large-scale data to examine the systemic issues raised in the current study. Some example questions include these: What types of schools do families list on their school lottery applications, and how may these lists vary by family background characteristics and where they live? What family background characteristics are associated with obtaining matches at schools? What is the likelihood of students from marginalized communities in DC being admitted to high-quality schools? Pairing these descriptive quantitative data with more qualitative data that capture family processes in ranking schools will best situate research in understanding systemic issues that reproduce unequal education opportunities and outcomes.

This study followed three mothers over the course of a year to examine how they navigated a preschool lottery amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, their sources of information to evaluate schools were examined, as were their strategies for ranking schools on their lottery applications. The findings shed light on preschool lotteries and the informal rules that guide them, reproducing existing structural economic and racial inequalities. The quantitative data further supported what these mothers shared and demonstrated the persistence of racial and economic inequalities even in an environment of school choice. Finally, the study highlighted what these middle-class families were looking for in preschools in this context. While they had specific preferences for preschools, proximity to home and access to quality schools were still a concern. Future

research should continue to examine how lotteries work in other contexts and explore how strategies vary across circumstances.

Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter



Office of Research Integrity and Assurance

Research Hall, 4400 University Drive, MS 6D5, Fairfax, Virginia
22030 Phone: 703-993-5445; Fax: 703-993-9590

DATE: March 13, 2020

TO: Colleen Vesely

FROM: George Mason University IRB

Project Title: [1555357-1] Social Class and

Preschool Choice SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: March 13, 2020

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category #2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

Please remember that all research must be conducted as described in the submitted materials.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be submitted to the IRB office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

If you have any questions, please contact Kim Paul at (703) 993-4208 or kpaul4@gmu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of five years, or as described in your submission, after the completion of the project.

Please note that department or other approvals may also be required to conduct your research.

GMU IRB Standard Operating Procedures can be found here:
<https://rdia.gmu.edu/topics-of-interest/human-or-animal-subjects/human-subjects/human-subjects-sops/>

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within George Mason University IRB's records.

on IRBNet

Generated

Appendix B

Listserv Announcement

Do you currently have a child between the ages of 2 and 5? Are you participating in the DC school lottery and interested in sharing your experiences and helping others understand how parents look for and apply to preschools? If so, please contact me, Jeremy Redford, at jredfor2@gmu.edu to share your experiences and ideas. I am a doctoral student in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University, and I am currently conducting my dissertation research, which is focused on understanding the strategies that parents in Washington, DC use to select a preschool (this study has been approved by George Mason's Institutional Review Board, Reference Number 1555357-1). If eligible, you will be asked to participate in three interviews, one each in March, May, and the beginning of next school year. Interviews can be conducted either in person or through Skype and will last about an hour. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Jeremy Redford, M.S.
Ph.D. Candidate, George Mason University

Appendix C

Consent Form for First Three Interviews

A STUDY OF PRESCHOOL SELECTION IN WASHINGTON, DC INFORMED CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This research is being conducted to develop a better understanding of the process parents use to select preschools in Washington, DC through the city's school lottery system. If you agree to participate, you will participate in three interviews approximately 30-60 minutes in length, over the course of 6 months about strategies and sources of information used to select your child's preschool. There will also be a short background survey questionnaire for you to complete after the first interview. By consenting you also agree to allow the interview to be audio-recorded. Recordings will be deleted once the final report is written.

RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

BENEFITS

There are no direct benefits other than assisting with research.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be kept confidential. Your name will never be used in the final report and all recordings and notes will be destroyed once the final report is written. The interview will be audio-recorded for the researcher's benefit to review the discussion at a later time. Interviews will be recorded in an electronic format. The recorder will be kept secure in a locked drawer in the student investigator's office in Fairfax, VA. The electronic files will also be password protected, and will be kept on the student investigator's password protected computer. Once summaries and the final report have been written, the recordings will be deleted. Only the researcher will have access to the recordings. Your name will not be included on any interview notes and only the student investigator and principal investigator will have access to the interview materials. The de-

identified data could be used for future research without additional consent from participants.

While it is understood that no computer transmission can be perfectly secure, reasonable efforts will be made to protect the confidentiality of your transmission. Participants may review Skype's website for information about their privacy statement.

PARTICIPATION

Participation criteria is based on parents who have a child between the ages of 2 and 5 years old, and who are participating in the DC lottery to enroll their child in a pre-k3 or pre-k4 program.

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

CONTACT

This research is being conducted by Jeremy Redford, M.S. within the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. He may be reached at 202-997-3462 for questions or to report a research-related problem. You may also contact Dr. Colleen Vesely, Jeremy's advisor, at 703-993-5346. You may contact the George Mason University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research (IRBNet number: 1555357-1).

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study. Those who participate via Skype should indicate their consent verbally.

Signature

Date of Signature

Appendix D

Interview Protocols

PARTICIPANT ID:

Interview Protocol #1

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study on preschool choice and sharing your experiences with me. Your participation will help researchers better understand the experiences of parents just like you as they are going through the DC lottery system. As mentioned in the informed consent form, I will be audio-recording this interview so that I can focus on listening to what you say rather than writing down notes. I will use the audio-recording to review the things that you tell me, and the recordings will be deleted after the final report is written. Also, anything that is discussed in this interview is completely confidential and won't be shared with anyone else. Your name will never be used in the final report and you can choose a pseudonym if you wish. The interview is scheduled to last about 30-60 minutes. This interview may be closer to 60 minutes, but future interviews will probably be half of that. If it is easier for you, we can break this interview up into more than one meeting. I will be sure that I don't keep you any longer than that.

As a reminder, your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty. I will also be recording this interview so that I can focus on listening to what you are saying.

Can I get your verbal agreement to participate in the interview?

Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Okay. Let's begin.

1. As you know, this interview is about getting parents' perspectives on the preschool choice process and how they navigate the DC lottery system. I thought that it would be helpful to begin by just telling me a little bit about {CHILD}. (5-10 minutes)
 - a. What does he/she like to do?
 - b. What type of care arrangement is he/she in now. [*Probe: Has CHILD always been in this arrangement?*]
 - c. Is he/she looking forward to going to preschool?
2. Now, I was wondering if we could switch gears a bit. Could you tell me about the process of finding schools? (20-25 minutes)
 - a. When did you start thinking about this?
 - b. When did you begin searching websites and asking people? What were the steps that you took?
 - c. Where do you get information about the schools you are considering when you were first beginning your search? (For example, friends, school websites, etc.).
 - d. Did you attend DC EdFest? Walk me through that experience?
 - e. Did you attend any open houses? If so, how many and what was that like?
 - f. Did you reach out to school staff/officials at this time? What kind of questions did you ask them?
 - g. Tell me about other families/parents? Did you talk to them at all during this process? How do they inform your decision-making process?
3. What would you say are the ideal characteristics that you are looking for in your child's preschool?
 - a. Are you looking for just preschool characteristics, or are you looking at the elementary school as a whole?
 - b. Which schools are your top choices?
 - c. Which ones will be at the bottom of your list?
 - i. Can you tell me more about what is appealing and not appealing about those schools?
4. Could you tell me about your general feelings about this process we just discussed (e.g., anxious or good about getting into school of choice)? (5 minutes)

- a. Do you have a plan of action in case {CHILD} gets in school you do not like?
5. Is there any information that you think is missing from the school selection process? If so, did you develop any strategies to fill those holes? (5 minutes)
6. Looking back on the process so far, what advice would you give other parents? (5 minutes)
7. Looking ahead, what is on your mind about this process? How do you feel about your chances of getting into the school you want? (5 minutes)

Closing: OK. Well those are all the questions I have for now. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about before we end the interview?

Interview Protocol #2

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me again. I hope that everything has been going well for you. I know that I covered the confidentiality agreement last time we spoke, but I wanted to do so again before we continue. As a reminder, your participation will help researchers better understand the experiences of parents just like you as they are going through the DC lottery system and trying to find preschools for their children. I will be audio-recording this interview so that I can focus on listening to what you say rather than writing down notes. I will use the audio-recording to review the things that you tell me, and the recordings will be deleted after the final report is written. Anything that is discussed in this interview is completely confidential and won't be shared with anyone else. Your name will never be used in the final report. The interview is scheduled to last about 30-60 minutes.

As a reminder, your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty. I will also be recording this interview so that I can focus on listening to what you are saying.

Can I get your verbal agreement to participate in the interview?

Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Great.

1. So last time we spoke, we talked about your process for searching preschools. Tell me about how things have gone since then. (10-15 minutes)
 - a. How were the lottery results?
 - b. Which school did (CHILD) get accepted? Where was this school ranked on your list?
2. What are your feelings about these results? Are you happy or concerned about them? (5-10 minutes)
3. What will be your process for making a decision? (10-15 minutes)
 - a. On what criteria will you use to pick the school you were chosen, or be wait-listed for another school?
 - b. Have you talked with other families about your decisions?
 - c. How about anyone from DC public schools?
4. (IF PARENT SEEMS RELUCTANT ABOUT THE SCHOOL CHILD WAS ADMITTED): What process are you planning to use to get your child in another school? What will you do if that does not work? (10 minutes)
 5. Looking back on the process so far, what advice would you give other parents? (5 minutes)
 6. Looking ahead, what is on your mind about this process? How do you feel at the moment? How do you feel about the school your child is slated to attend? (5 minutes)

Those are all the questions that I have at this time. Is there anything else that you would like to discuss? OK great. Well, we have one last interview to go. I plan to reach out again at the around the end of August when the school year begins for one last interview. I know it will be a busy time but I really appreciate your participation, so look for an email or phone call from me towards the end of August.

Interview Protocol #3

It is nice to see you again. I hope that everything has been going well for you and that you had a nice summer. This will be our last interview together, and I wanted to say thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to talk with me about your preschool choice experiences. Again, as a reminder:

- your participation will help researchers better understand the experiences of parents just like you as they are going through the DC lottery system and trying to find preschools for their child.

- I will be audio-recording this interview so that I can focus on listening to what you say rather than writing down notes. I will use the audio-recording to review the things that you tell me, and the recordings will be deleted after the final report is written.
- Anything that is discussed in this interview is completely confidential and won't be shared with anyone else. Your name will never be used in the final report.
- The interview is scheduled to last about 30-60 minutes.

Can I get your verbal agreement to participate in the interview?

Do I have your permission to record this interview?

I will be sure that I don't keep you any longer than that. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. How is everything going for {CHILD}? Was he/she excited for preschool? (5 minutes)
2. Tell me about how everything has gone since the last time that we spoke? Last time you told me that {CHILD} was accepted in {SCHOOL NAME}. Have there been any changes to his school since then? (5-10 minutes)
 3. (IF PARENT WAS RELUCTANT ABOUT THE SCHOOL CHILD WAS ADMITTED): You mentioned last time some reluctance about the school that (CHILD) was admitted, can you tell me how you feel now? (10-15 minutes)
 - a. Is child going to same school? (IF NO): What was the process for getting him/her in a new school?
4. Tell me about your feelings about the about where child is enrolled. (5-10 minutes)
 - a. Do you have any concerns about where the child is enrolled?
 - b. Do you have any plans to use the lottery system again to find another school?
5. Now that {CHILD} is enrolled, what advice would you give other parents who will be entering the lottery in December? What types of strategies would you recommend? (5 minutes)

OK. Those are all the questions that I have for you. Is there any last comments you would like to make before we end this final interview?

Great. I really appreciate you sharing your experiences about your preschool selection process over these last several months. This will greatly help understanding of the preschool selection process.

Interview Protocol #4

It is good hear from you again. I hope that everything has been going well for you and that you have had a good first half of the school year. Thank you for agreeing to this one last interview to touch base on how the school year has gone so far.

Again, as a reminder:

- your participation will help researchers better understand the experiences of parents just like you as they are going through the DC lottery system and trying to find preschools for their children.
- I will be audio-recording this interview so that I can focus on listening to what you say rather than writing down notes. I will use the audio-recording to review the things that you tell me, and the recordings will be deleted after the final report is written.
- Anything that is discussed in this interview is completely confidential and won't be shared with anyone else. Your name will never be used in the final report.
- The interview is scheduled to last about 20-30 minutes.

Can I get your verbal agreement to participate and record the interview?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. How has everything gone since the last time that we spoke? Last time you told me that {CHILD} was enrolled in {SCHOOL NAME}/{WAITLISTED AT PREFERRED SCHOOL}/{CONSIDERING PRIVATE PRESCHOOL}. Have there been any changes to his/her school since then? (5-10 minutes).
 2. Probe regarding COVID school challenges. Last time we spoke {CHILD} was in virtual schooling because of COVID. Tell me about that experience over the last several months. (~5 minutes)
 - a. Respondent specific probes: {You were considering a private preschool because of the uncertainty of COVID. What did you end up doing?} {You were in a parenting pod in response to COVID. How has that gone?}

{You had an Au Pair to help with child care and assisting with school during COVID. How has that gone?}

3. Tell me about your impressions of {ENROLLED SCHOOL} since {CHILD} has attended since September. (5-10 minutes)
 - a. Probe on factors parent was looking for when listing school choices, such as, diversity, dual language, special education services, proximity to home.
4. What are your plans for the future? (~5minutes)
 - a. Probe on whether they are entering the lottery again. If yes, probe why and what they are looking for that is different.
5. Looking back on the process, what advice would you give other parents? (5 minutes)

OK. Those are all the questions that I have for you. Is there any last comments you would like to make before we end this final interview? Great. I really appreciate you sharing your experiences about your preschool selection process over these last several months. This will greatly help understanding of the preschool selection process.

Appendix E

Demographic Questionnaire

PARTICIPANT ID:

1. Is this your first child going through Washington, DC's public-school lottery?
2. Are you Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
3. What is your race? (You may mark one or more races).
 - a. Asian
 - b. Black or African American
 - c. White
 - d. Other (Please specify)
4. What is your highest level of education?
 - a. Less than high school
 - b. High school diploma or equivalent
 - c. Some college, but no degree
 - d. Associate's degree
 - e. Bachelor's degree
 - f. Master's degree
 - g. Doctorate degree (for example, Ph.D. or Ed.D.)
 - h. Professional degree after Bachelor's degree (for example, Medicine/MD; Dentistry/DDS; LAW/JD/LLB)
5. What is your occupation?
6. How are you related to this child?
 - a. Mother or father (birth, adoptive, step, or foster)
 - b. Aunt or uncle
 - c. Grandmother or grandfather
 - d. Parent's girlfriend/boyfriend/partner
 - e. Other (please specify)

Appendix F

Participant Summaries

Layla

In the first interview, Layla discussed her process for collecting information about preschools. Her son was currently being cared for by a part-time nanny. Layla said she did not attend DC EdFEST (the school fair) and said that this led her and her wife to feeling behind. She and her wife did not begin thinking about preschools until mid-January, when they started making a color-coded spreadsheet based on schools accessed through the My DC website within a 5-mile radius of their house. The spreadsheet included the name, distance from their house, math and literacy scores, school rating, and columns with notes about their preferences.

Layla said she did not like uniforms, and their son attending a dual language school that is diverse was very important to them. As people of color, how administrators talked about the schools during school visits was very important to them. Some administrators during visits were cavalier, and Layla and her wife were fearful of assumptions made about young African American boys needing extra help and needing more discipline. Free space to run around and play was also an important factor for them. They were really looking for a school that aligned with their values and things that they

cared about. As Layla said when discussing a school she liked, “We want this place to be run by people who care about the things we care about, like he was talking about having an international worldview.... Language is really important because it kind of opens your mind to all these different cultures.” They also wanted a school that was diverse and not predominantly Black. They did talk to other parents, but they were not overly reliant on information from others.

Layla and her wife wanted a school near where they lived. Layla said that they started thinking about schools when deciding where to live. While they did not feel like there were good schools at the time that they bought their house, through the current process of finding a preschool they realized there were good schools nearby. These schools seemed to be charter schools since they strategically did not place any traditional public schools on their initial lottery list. Layla admitted to having anxiety over the preschool selection process because she and her wife realized that this was their best chance to get into a good feeder school.

Her family’s top six schools were as follows:

1. Westview-Spanish immersion
2. Westview-French immersion
3. Westview
4. Westview
5. Richmond School
6. Malibu

They put Westview as the top four to play the preference system later if they wanted. For example, maybe they would want to switch from Spanish to French later. Being enrolled in the school, on a different campus, would give them a priority preference. They also liked Westview because if you got in there you would have preference at a good high school—Montgomery—that continues the language immersion. Even though Malibu was in the middle she really liked Malibu. She liked how Malibu talked about race and class issues related to the school lottery.

Location and school type mattered in this process. The location of the schools matters because even though each campus has a similar curriculum, the campuses on the west side often have high wait lists each year that makes it more difficult to get into. Charter schools also matter in this respect because desired traditional public schools are typically in other areas, and because of the proximity preferences, the waitlists are high and therefore the schools are difficult to get into. Layla mentioned Enon Elementary as one traditional public school that was like this:

Enon that I had this conversation with [a school administrator] and he basically was like, Oh, are you in bounds? And at that point I didn't even know what that meant. I was like, What do you mean in bounds? And he was like, where do you live? And he's like, oh, you're not in bounds, it doesn't look good for you. I wouldn't bother. And I was like, what? Like, I mean, at that point, I didn't even know what he was talking about. I was like, wait, how do I know if I'm in bounds and who's in bounds and why why, you know, like, I thought the lottery was gonna equalize things.

From that experience Layla and her wife realized that they could not waste one of their 12 lottery picks on a traditional public school that was outside of their neighborhood, and they should focus on nearby charter schools that do not have proximity or in-boundary preferences.

Layla acknowledged her position of privilege relative to others in the amount of time and resources that she and her wife could devote to researching schools. She discussed a lot of privilege within the system that stemmed from her being able to attend open houses during the day, but there were others who benefited just from where they lived as well. Part of this was due to race. We talked about how she saw families of color being driven out of some areas and how that created barriers to good schools.

During the time of the first interview Layla had been waitlisted at her preferred schools—the four Westview campuses and Malibu—and they had been offered a spot at Springfield. She was not excited about this because the school was perceived to have rigid school rules and it required uniforms. She mentioned that Springfield is also a predominantly Black school in a Black neighborhood, which was a negative since she previously mentioned that diversity was important to her family. She also said Springfield was disciplinary focused, but the scores were OK for DC.

During the interview in June 2020, Layla was still not happy with the matched school—Springfield—but she was still on the waitlist for the four Westview campuses and Malibu. They were number 1 on the waitlist for Malibu. Layla did not mention the status of Richmond School in this conversation. Despite Malibu being behind Westview, she really liked Malibu because the school was reflective of the surrounding

neighborhood and the school talked about equality in its emphasis on race and class issues; in addition, one of the PK3 teachers was lesbian, which made them feel at home.

At this time, COVID was beginning to weigh on her decision making. She was worried that COVID would impact the decision making of other parents and make it harder for her family to get off waitlists because of reduced class sizes. There was not a lot of information coming from DC Public Schools about next school year, but there was some discussion about some type of hybrid instruction. Because of this, Layla and her wife changed their childcare plans and hired an au pair to help juggle child care duties and schooling.

The process at this point was causing some anxiety, and Layla was checking the waitlist status every day, and in some cases she noticed the numbers going up (i.e., more people were moving in front of her on the waitlist). The reason for falling farther down on waitlists was not clear, but their best guess was that others were moving up because of lottery preferences (e.g., for siblings). However, Layla was determined to wait out the process, and if her son got into Westview then they were going to put him there, even if it happened in October. However, because of COVID everything felt unsafe and there seemed to be some differences between Layla and her wife as to whether to have him in school, especially if he was still at Springfield. It did not seem worth the risk to her with COVID to send him to a school that they didn't like, but if he got into Malibu or Westview it would be worth it because it is not worth the risk of giving up the spot because there would be fewer seats for PK4 next school year (i.e., PK3 is the best chance for him to get in).

During the interview conducted in early October 2020, Layla said that her son had been offered a seat at Malibu and that is where he was enrolled. Despite Layla saying in June 2020 that she liked Malibu, she said they still felt like they were in limbo with Westview. She said this process was nerve-wracking, but they were getting closer—she said she checked multiple times a day and her son was waitlisted at 4 for Spanish and 7 for French. COVID had not really influenced their decision about whether or where to enroll. However, her PK3 son was doing virtual schooling with the au pair helping a lot. Overall, they were happy with Malibu and despite the lottery process being nerve-wracking, she appreciated the different choices she had, especially regarding language immersion.

The conversation in October ended with us talking about the overall process. We talked again about her and her wife using the excel spreadsheet. The process for looking for schools is time-intensive and parent specific, and interactions with schools was very important. For example, if a school would not accommodate a visit after a missed open house, Layla interpreted this as how the school may be inflexible in other areas in her son's schooling. She also wanted a school with like-minded worldviews, but there were other standard measures that they looked at as well, such as ratings on Great Schools, test scores, and DC STAR ratings. However, they knew lottery preferences were important because Layla had friends who listed only the popular schools that had boundary preferences and they did not match anywhere. When asked how this process might be improved, she said the lottery should take into account diversity and income so that there “wouldn't be such a clustering of White people at the better schools, because they get in-

boundary preference because they buy the expensive houses. Well, first they buy up the houses in gentrifying neighborhood. And then they end up getting preference for the school for that neighborhood.”

During the last interview around March 2021, Layla’s son was still enrolled at Malibu East End, and she was playing the lottery again. Her family had moved to a neighborhood with a local school with better test scores, but it still lacked the diversity she was looking for. Her new local school was predominately White and Asian, so she was playing the lottery again for Westview.

Evelyn

Evelyn began thinking about the process of finding schools when she was pregnant. She began getting nervous about the schools, and she was influenced by other parents thinking about it before school began as well. Evelyn said that her anxiety went away as her daughter got older and they decided they wanted to focus on their community. She and her husband did not begin focusing on the lottery until December 2019. They did a bit of research on their own and spoke with parents in day care as well as friends. On a date night, they discussed which schools they wanted to put on the lottery form. Her daughter was in a bilingual day care, so they were trying to find a place that was diverse where she could continue bilingual studies. They went to school websites and reviewed school ratings and Google Maps to see what traffic would look like. They also looked at popular and local parenting websites and listservs. They did not attend DC EdFEST but did go to open houses, where they looked at how teachers and administrators interacted. They stayed away from administrators who gave simplistic answers during

these open houses, and they wanted a school that was more inclusive. Value was placed on proximity to home and diversity of the school.

Evelyn said that when talking to other parents during this process, a lot of parents put down highly coveted elementary schools, and she knew they would not be likely to get in because everyone was signing up for these schools. She kept Malibu, Mantua Charter, and Frost Charter on her list, but she was really looking for an environment where her daughter could learn, which is why she liked Malibu. Evelyn was thinking about elementary school as a whole when deciding on preschool, and her top choices were Malibu Campus A, Nashville Elementary, Boston Academy, Richmond School, and Thompson; Arbor Heights was at the bottom of the list.

She decided that she had no control over this lottery process. Privilege plays a part in the lottery because her family is not stuck if they don't get into the school that they want. They could go private or continue in day care where their daughter currently was and try again. She mentioned to me that DC tries to make it equitable, but it is a complicated process that creates another system of inequity—you have to choose multiple schools, you have to locate those schools and determine where they are, and you need access to a computer. All this takes time and resources. In the end she said there just aren't enough good schools in the city.

Evelyn said that people also pay consultants, and there are inequities first by location—east of the river there are few good schools. In addition, there are inequities by information; some parents game the system. For example, Malibu has two campuses and is a good school. Parents will apply for Malibu Campus A because they know that there

are open slots and they can get in; then in the next lottery they apply for a transfer (where they would receive a preference in the lottery because they already attend the school at a different campus) to have the student get into the school they ultimately wanted, which is Malibu Campus B. Evelyn mentioned that she was not comfortable with this and said that it was racist.

She also said that people hire consultants to check final decisions and help navigate the process. She said that there is one consultant that everyone talks about. There are also a few known unknowns to this process—for example, don't apply to any public schools on the Hill because you will never get in. They are already at capacity. She said that a consultant could quickly tell you that if you don't already know. At the end of the first interview, Evelyn was unsure about the outcome of the lottery results. She said that there were around 50 slots available for Malibu Campus A for next year, and Arbor Heights was an in-boundary preference, but she did not like the school.

During the interview in early summer 2020, Evelyn received notice that her daughter got into their first choice right away—Malibu Campus A—without any waitlist. She and her husband had already decided before they got the results that if they did not get into Malibu they would keep their daughter in the current preschool/daycare for another year and just lottery again.

When asked for advice she would give to other parents who are just beginning this process, she suggested that others focus on what is best for their family. For her, during elementary school, proximity to home was important so that they could spend time together as a family, and Malibu, in her mind, was the best school in proximity to her

house where they would feel good about the education her daughter would get. This is in contrast to what she perceives as other parents doing, where they go after popular schools that everybody applies for and they get waitlisted at these ridiculous numbers, like, you're like waitlist number 242...1,000. Even so, yeah, so we just decided, like, we looked at all those schools were like, yeah, it would be awesome if we lived in those neighborhoods to be on the lottery for them. But we're not in those neighborhoods, so therefore you have to, like, weigh in the opportunity cost of spending an hour in the car each day.

Other participants interviewed were also eyeing feeder schools in their planning, but Evelyn seemed more relaxed about this and content to just see how elementary school unfolded. They were happy with the Montessori education through fifth grade and they would just see at middle school.

Evelyn explained the problem of the location of DC schools, which means you are reliant on the lottery. Even parents in neighborhoods that already have coveted traditional public schools also play the lottery, which further takes up valuable spots for others. Trying to get into good traditional public schools sounded impossible because they had long waitlists and most of the slots were taken by neighborhood positions.

During the second interview, Evelyn was concerned about what school was going to look like next year because PK3 is not necessary, her daughter's current arrangement was already familiar, and "most of the students would be back, so there would be some consistency and the teachers would be consistent. And we weren't crazy about our other options for school." At the beginning of summer 2020, DC was already floating the idea

of hybrid schooling to parents via a survey. Evelyn already anticipated that they would not go back on a normal schedule.

Around October 2020, school had started, and Evelyn's daughter had started at Malibu. Evelyn was happy with the school onboarding process despite being in an all-virtual setting. This seemed like an intense schedule for working parents to support. Evelyn said they originally planned to send her daughter back to daycare when the schools closed but decided not to since Malibu was their first-choice school and she had to stay enrolled for her to keep her spot. In addition, the daycare did not open until 10:30. Because of this they started a school pod with another family with a caregiver. The caregiver was attending the Montessori home trainings through the school. She would be helping kids with the education "and make sure that they stay engaged." (There was some confusion over what exactly the attendance was during this time.)

Since Evelyn's daughter got into the school of her first choice, we discussed some about whether the school met her expectations and she seemed very pleased. She liked how Malibu focused on the things she cared about. Racial equity and justice. She said that COVID has compounded the "haves and have nots" and that the school was really sensitive about these issues by "talking openly about like whether or not cameras should be required for in-person learning. If students don't feel comfortable showing their home with a space that they're working in." The school also provided space where parents could seek information about school pods. She was aware of her own privilege in that they were paying for the nanny/school pod while also caring about the equity issues discussed throughout our interviews together.

Evelyn suggested parents research schools and understand what is important for your family, beyond academics, and then rank those schools first. There are some rules that you could apply—don't apply to schools that have long waitlists—but otherwise focus on what is good for your family. She also suggested that whatever school you get into invest in that school. She thought instances where parents continually reapply is not always best for the kids. She also mentioned the DC Public Schools website tried to lay out the options available, but it is all overwhelming, and said parent networks and listservs were also places where parents could receive information about schools.

In March 2021, about 12 months after the first interview with Evelyn, her daughter was still enrolled at Malibu Campus A. Evelyn really liked Malibu and its emphasis on inclusion. Evelyn was playing the lottery again because her family was considering becoming foster parents. They entered her daughter in the lottery so they could try to use sibling preferences to get the possible foster child in a better school than their local neighborhood school. However, Evelyn was conflicted about doing so because her daughter liked Malibu Campus A. Because of that, they were considering private school options for their foster child.

Sara

Sara was looking for schools that could accommodate her sons' disabilities—"particularly [avoiding] schools that focus a lot on routine and compliance because my fear was that if he can't understand directions, he's going to get punished for things he has absolutely no control over." Sara's experiences from the prior year informed how she approached this year. She had a wealth of information on the lottery process despite

telling me at times that she did not have a strategy, or her strategy was haphazard. She remained calm and OK with whatever the results gave her this year even though she admitted last year the process produced anxiety for her. She also felt confident that, worst-case scenario, her younger son could just end up at the school her older son currently attended (Salem Elementary) because of sibling preferences and the waitlist for that school was typically shorter.

Sara's sons' disabilities led her to rule out a lot of charter schools because she did not feel like there would be much recourse for her if she had issues with how her sons' IEPs were being implemented in a charter school setting. She started with her neighborhood school—James River Elementary—and she also looked at schools that were close to her younger son's daycare. She looked for common factors as well—recommendations, STAR ratings, test scores. She attended open houses, and the impressions generated from those open houses informed whether schools were a good fit. This included schools that were otherwise highly regarded. Initially she wanted to put her younger son in a Montessori school, but she ended up being concerned about the class sizes because of her child's social delays.

She did go to EdFEST, where she spoke with school personnel, and she asked questions about how they handle children with speech delays. However, they could not always answer her questions. She asked others she knew, but this seemed to be of little value. She also went to popular parenting sites and asked questions in online forums, and she looked at DCPS websites that provided standardized test scores and star ratings.

Race did play into her decision making for schools. Sara was concerned how schools support African American males and the Black–White achievement gap. She looked for this information online because asking administrators about this would generate excuses. Also, geographic location mattered, as she first began thinking about schools when she was looking at where to live. She said that the lottery ultimately decides where you go to school but in some areas there are great neighborhood schools already, so

the rest of us are just, you know, doing our best and throwing a hat into the ring and hoping that we'll land someplace that will support our children in a way and educate in the way that we want them to be educated.

Schools in Northwest DC have wealthier families, which gives those schools advantages.

Sara felt OK about wherever her sons went to school this year because for preschool most of the schools were pretty good. Sara said it was in the later grades where you needed to start worrying and possibly moving your child to another school. She used the school her older son currently attended as an example—it was a Title I school that she had been happy with, but long term it would not be a good fit, which was going to require her to participate in the lottery again.

During the first interview the schools she was looking at were Salem (older son's current school), Robious, and Westview. Those were her top two (both were charters). She listed schools on her application as well that were less popular because of lower test scores, but she had a good feeling about them, and her son ended up getting into some of

those. She did reference waitlist data as informing which schools to apply to. She mentioned reading threads on a popular parenting site where people did not get into any schools because they listed all the popular ones.

Sara had a good understanding of how the lottery worked. She knew if she did not get in anywhere that she could add schools to her application. Part of this knowledge probably came from going through it the previous year. She mentioned how when she first went through this with her older son, she lost sleep and it felt very high stakes, but this year the lottery was more relaxed because she knew worst case both would have a school to go to because of sibling preferences. This year, she made separate lists for both of her sons to see where they would get in, with the thinking that if one son got into a preferred school, the second son may get a sibling preference and also attend. She likened this process to college admissions where you have “long shots and your safeties.” She said that the most popular schools have limited slots because “other people who already have children there and a lot of seats go to siblings. You know, they may have one or two seats available for nonsiblings and you get 6,000 applications.” Some schools were coveted, like Frost Charter, because of status. Sara seemed to learn this information through her own efforts. She never explicitly shared her relationship status, but throughout the interviews Sara never mentioned another parental figure in the household.

Sara’s working knowledge of the DC lottery was on display during our second interview. She had submitted a postlottery application and added some charter schools. Salem was still an option as her youngest son matched at that school, but through a postlottery application they were offered seats at two more schools for both kids—

Simmons Public Charter and Tufts. She turned down both because of proximity and because of class sizes in light of COVID. Since the last interview her youngest son had been further evaluated; he struggled in social peer interaction and she was worried that large Montessori classrooms would not be a good fit for him. At the time of the second interview, which coincided with enrollment day, she was leaning toward having both sons attend Salem and, as part of her strategy, was going to see how things played out on the waiting lists for the other schools. Her preference was Robious and Canterbury, each of which had different waitlist numbers. Here she was playing the sibling preferences at the respective schools. As she said, “The way it works is if my oldest son gets a seat at Canterbury—because his current number I think I just said number 30—then my youngest son will get moved up the list.” Because she had two sons, this gave her an advantage at more than one school. However, at this stage she was still OK with having them both at Salem. She seemed to be both familiar and comfortable with this school. She had been happy with the services her older son got there, the teachers he had there, and other factors.

I was having a hard time reconciling the positive things she said about Salem in the last interview, her current contentment, and continuing to play the lottery, so I asked. She said that these other schools have better test scores and that Salem was a Title I school that served a lot of lower income kids, which to her seemed to relate to less flexibility with instruction and more focus on academics and less play in preschool. However, there were other factors that she would need to consider (cost of aftercare) if she left Salem, in addition to commute. She said she was disappointed with the lottery

results because she wanted them to have more opportunity than Salem had to offer, but then she decided that for preschool it would probably be OK.

In order to get all this information she noted that there were so many small details. She mentioned sources such as calling DC Helpline, but she said she had spent a lot of time doing research last year for her older son—going to My DC website, neighborhood and listserv groups and asking questions, Facebook, and open houses. The time it took and the fear of making the wrong decision caused a lot of anxiety for her.

During open houses she mentioned some schools that were rated highly that did not feel welcoming. She also mentioned her race and having Black sons. She did not want them singled out because of their race:

I'm Black and I have concerns you know if my sons go to school, or they're gonna be singled out every time something goes wrong, or if they respond to a situation in a way that's age appropriate. But someone else may not be as willing to look at that, because of the color of their skin just I don't want them to be a minority.

And I think at some of those schools that's what I felt is that they would be, you know. I don't want my sons to be one of two Black kids in the class.

Then there were other schools that may not have been rated as highly but were more diverse. These open house experiences led Sara to consider racial and socioeconomic diversity more in her searches. She noted that there are some public schools with wealthy families where the PTAs raise enough money to pay for additional staff. She said that these are west of Rock Creek Park in upper Northwest DC and noted how this factored into her search for schools: "If we do get in then I still to have to contend with other

things, that the school may be well resourced but is this a welcoming, warm environment for my, you know, minority middle-class children.” These nice schools Sara was referring to seemed to be traditional public schools, but you really must live in the neighborhood to get into them.

At the second interview she was still trying to predict what school was going to look like next year with COVID. She was beginning to ask herself what to do if the public schools did not open. And even if her son did get into one of the charter schools, there was still the possibility of her staying with Salem because of COVID and doing the lottery again. As she mentioned, the lottery is a process that never ends because down the road she would have middle and high school to worry about and then college.

During the third interview, Sara’s set of choices had changed. At this point, the school year had started and her children were enrolled—not at Salem or the two charters she had been waitlisted for during our last discussion—but at Northeastern Charter School. Since both of her sons had IEPs, she wanted them to attend a school that would support their needs. When her younger son got his IEP and she realized he needed more support, her priorities changed. While the school is a longer commute for her, that was secondary to the services that her sons would receive (she said that 30% of students at Northeastern are special needs). Her youngest son got in first and then her older son got in via sibling preference. This process took a few weeks. Despite her concern about aftercare and aftercare costs in earlier interviews, she was willing to pay extra money that the school charged.

During the month of October, Sara was able through the CARES Act to work part time at her job via emergency sick leave. However, she noted that this was not a viable long-term strategy, so she applied for and her sons were accepted into a private preschool. She had not signed the contract as of our last talk, but it was a real possibility. If she chose the private option, it would mean that she would lose her spot at Northeastern and have to reapply next year. Maintaining enrollment was unclear, and Sara was going to find out the requirement for attendance. She felt confident they could probably get in next year as well because it was a Tier 2 school that served special needs students and the test scores were lower—it was a middle-of-the-road school that would not likely be high on everyone’s lists. She felt like she needed to think about if DC schools opened and then closed again, what would happen, and she felt like the private preschool would be more likely to stay open because they also had a daycare license.

I asked her at the end about where she learned all the information, and she mentioned that My School DC had videos that explain the lottery, but parenting websites, listservs, and Facebook parenting groups seemed really important. When asked what advice she would give, she recommended starting research early, with parenting groups, listservs, and Facebook groups being the best places to get information about schools. She said the open houses were salesy: “Even though it’s education, it’s commodified and they, you know, schools get paid for the number of students that enroll.”

During the last interview around March 2021, Sara was playing the lottery again. Her sons had been enrolled in private preschool for the entire year, and Sara only put one school on the lottery application the next year, which was a school she considered the

year before. Her focus had changed from preferences she had been worried about to making sure that her sons just enjoyed going to school, and she said she was willing to try the Montessori school mentioned.

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Biography

Jeremy Redford received his Bachelor of Science in Psychology and Sociology from Longwood University in 2001 and he received his Master of Science in Sociology from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2007.