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ABSTRACT

As increasing numbers of researchers, parents, and youth are rethinking the traditional school system as the default educational option in the United States, homeschooling is not only growing in size but also in philosophical scope and demographic diversity. African Americans particularly have been one of the steadiest-growing homeschooling demographics. Among the few ethnographic accounts of black homeschooling families, youth perceptions tend to be overlooked. This article builds upon scholarship exploring racial injustices in education with new qualitative research: observations and interviews with 15 African American homeschooling families living in Philadelphia. This research reveals a variety of motivations undergirding African American families' homeschooling decisions and perspectives, including commentary from youth homeschoolers. Previous research has critiqued homeschooling as a neoliberal exercise in privatization that entrenches the social reproduction of inequality, or operates as a destabilizing threat to public interest. Yet, findings from this study complicate these assessments by examining the ways African American homeschoolers enmesh themselves within educational reform conversations, some viewing homeschooling as a form of political protest.

Introduction

The growth of homeschooling in the United States raises questions as to the trends and motivations that have contributed to its broad appeal. Supporters point to the growth of hoeschooling as a challenge to prevailing schooling norms that have too long gone unquestioned (Bauman, 2002; Hill, 2000; Lines, 2000; Trotter, 2001). Conversely, many critics deem homeschooling a threat to the democratic fabric of the United States (Apple, 2000; Ball, 1998; Lubienski, 2003; Riegel, 2001). African Americans represent a growing, but understudied, population of homeschoolers. It is important to draw upon contemporary critiques of homeschooling to contextualize how black homeschoolers' experiences fit among, and contribute to, the existing literature.

Many scholars situate homeschooling within a broader neoliberal attempt to infuse education with market logics of competition and choice (Apple, 2000; Ball, 1998; Hanson-Thiem, 2007; Lubienski, 2003; Stein, 2001; Whitty & Edwards, 1998). In this sense, homeschoolers embody privilege, as an education choice outside the public system advances private advantage not available to those without access to similar social, cultural, and economic capital. Critics warn that private options (i.e., homeschooling, voucher programs, "for-profit" institutions) augment educational inequalities in the public sphere (Ball, 1998; Lubienski, 2003; Riegel, 2001). Embedded in this critique is the view that homeschooling perpetuates "anti-State" politics, whereby parents seek to "shelter" or "cocoon" their children from ideologies or status markers apart from their own (Apple, 2000; Avery-Grubel, 2009; Hanson-Thiem, 2007; Lubienski, 2003;

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Stein, 2001). One ardent critic labels homeschooling "quite dangerous" to the extent that the movement reflects how "our very sense of public responsibility is withering in ways that will lead to even further social inequalities" (Apple, 2000: p. 62).

These critiques that suggest privatized educational practices perpetuate social inequalities are important contributions to contemporary understandings of homeschooling. However, the few existing studies with African-American homeschoolers suggest that these very inequalities, and the ways they translate into racial injustice in schools, often serve as the catalysts for why black families switch to homeschooling (Fields-Smith & Wells Kisura, 2013; Mazama & Lundy, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015). Underfunded schools, limited extracurricular options, lack of cultural and historical representation, and pervasive negative stereotypes are just some of the factors black youth encounter in schooling (Fields-Smith & Wells Kisura, 2013; Mazama & Lundy, 2012, 2015). African-American families who choose homeschooling as a critical response to the constraints of institutional racism showcase important variation among homeschooling motivations that may be overlooked in neoliberal critiques.

In light of the limited existing qualitative research focusing on black homeschoolers' motivations, my study sought to draw attention to additional perspectives of black homeschooling families. This research was guided by two main questions: 1) What factors motivated the African-American parents in this study to begin homeschooling? 2) How do the youth in this study describe their daily lived experiences of homeschooling? The research took place in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a city that has garnered media attention for its growing African-American homeschooling population.[1] I conducted interviews and observations with 15 families over a span of nearly two years.

In this article, I draw upon this qualitative research to complicate scholarly understandings of the growing popularity of homeschooling. I begin with the account of one participant, Daria Woodson,[2] who expresses how multiple encounters with racism in the school system motivated her decision to homeschool as a form of political protest. After framing the analysis with Daria's narrative, I construct a conceptual framework for understanding dynamics of marginalization and liberation, informed by insights from black feminist theory. Next, I describe the study's methods, including the three phases of ethnographic research, participant demographics, and how previous qualitative homeschooling studies informed the methodology.

After laying out this conceptual and methodological foundation, I discuss the study's findings regarding motivations and experiences of homeschooling. This section weaves together scholarship examining educational injustices in schools with themes of marginalization and liberation found across participants' accounts. Broken into three parts, the findings section first addresses marginalizing experiences of school-related racism as important factors motivating parents' decisions to homeschool. However, the transition to homeschooling is not always immediate, nor seamless (Romm, 1993; Stevens, 2009). The second part of the findings section addresses the philosophical, logistical, and emotional hindrances that parents experienced when deciding to homeschool. Understanding these challenges provides depth to accounts of homeschooling motivations.

The third portion of the findings highlights the perspectives of homeschooled youth, whose voices are seldom featured in existing research. The young people in my study offered insightful accounts of institutional racism in schools and thoughtful reflections on the differences between their traditional schooling and homeschooling experiences. Incorporating perspectives of homeschooled youth of color into research would greatly enhance education reform debates, especially given the significant growth of families of color choosing to homeschool (USDE, 2012; 2016).

[1]The growth of homeschooling among African Americans in Philadelphia has been covered in local media outlets such as featured pieces in Philly Magazine in March 2016, The Philadelphia Tribune in December 2017, and Philly's 7th Ward in March 2017.
[2]Only pseudonyms of participants are used to protect anonymity.

Homeschooling as protest: Daria's journey from marginalization to liberation

> The decision to homeschool for many families is far from easy, but as a black family, it became the first time I stood upon the soapbox and took action as my first major protest. Like many parents, I began homeschooling because I was tired, angry, and frustrated. Tired of fighting the system. Angry from witnessing young people fall between the cracks of education. Frustrated by the walls of failure; but what blossomed was sheer determination. ("*Daria Woodson,*" 11 May 2017)

This excerpt from participant Daria Woodson's autobiographical essay, "Homeschooling is Our Protest," reframes neoliberal understandings of homeschooling to incorporate African-American perspectives of marginalization, determination, and protest. Daria shared the entirety of her essay with me during the course of my research. As she recounts, "fighting with the system" and encountering frustrating "walls of failure" led her to consider homeschooling, even as she experienced reluctance to educate her daughters at home. Like Daria, many African-American families face philosophical dilemmas and logistical hardships when grappling with the decision to homeschool (Romm, 1993). In fact, one of Daria's initial concerns about homeschooling involved perpetuating class reproduction and educational inequalities, just as scholarly critiques of homeschooling similarly suggest. Committed to public education for her daughters, Daria went through great hurdles to enroll her eldest in a "high quality" Philadelphia public school but was met with a jarring, racist interaction that she explains further in her essay:

> When I attempted to enroll my six-year-old into the school with all required documents in hand, [our eligibility] was questioned. After multiple requests for proof of residence and if "coupons" were required to pay the rent, the hidden elements surfaced and revealed the core problem. That day in June 2011, this oppressive, marginalizing, and devaluing behavior served as the final straw and became my first day of action. ("*Daria Woodson,*" 11 May 2017)

Daria's realization that racism was prevalent even in seemingly "quality" institutions served as the pivotal moment that led her to seek alternatives. Throughout the scope of our conversations, Daria revealed a history of growing up on the receiving end of racist ideologies, especially in her own schooling. As a black parent, Daria explained how difficult and tiresome it can be to prove the extent of ways that school contexts are steeped in racism. Daria added, "And I hear people say, 'You're part of the problem [of perpetuating educational inequalities] by homeschooling your kids'" (*Interview with "Daria Woodson,"* 23 June 2017).

Daria reveals multifaceted experiences of marginalization that stem not only from feeling burdened to "prove" the existence of institutional racism, but also by the stigma attached to homeschooling itself. The fact that black homeschoolers' experiences are barely addressed among homeschooling critics perpetuates this marginalization, given the systems of inequality that many black homeschoolers face (Mazama & Lundy, 2012, 2015). For Daria and her family, homeschooling is an active form of opposition to institutional racism.

Conceptual framework: Black feminist theories of marginality and liberation

Insights from black feminist theory help to dismantle the ideological separation between "public" and "private" spheres that underpins many critiques of homeschooling. I argue that homeschooling spaces are deeply connected to and integrated with public education, whereby they actively engage and inform each other. When Daria Woodson asserts that "Homeschooling is Our Protest," she transforms the seemingly private endeavor of homeschooling into a public stance of resistance. Daria compels us to view her homeschooling decision as not simply a *retreat* from the public system, but as a political critique of it.

Black feminist scholar bell hooks spatializes the theoretical "margin" as follows:

> Marginality is much more than a site of deprivation … it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. This marginality [offers] a central location for the production of counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in works but in habits of being and the way one lives. [This is not] a marginality that one wishes

> to lose--to give up or surrender as part of moving to the center--but rather a site one stays in … [The margin] offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds. (Hooks, 1989: p. 341)

Rather than understanding "the margin" as containing powerless victims who are cast out by processes of cultural and political hegemony, hooks suggests the margin offers a "special vantage point" where some of the most insightful, transformative social critiques are created (Hooks, 1984, 1990). Applying hooks' concept to homeschooling, research with African-American homeschoolers ought to inform not only homeschooling debates, but also educational public policy discourse more broadly. Much can be learned about the marginalizing forces of the school system from the perspective of black homeschoolers, whose "special vantage point" offers unique analytical insight into the intertwining processes of racialization and politicalization within the school system.

While hooks' theory of marginality provides a useful lens through which to legitimize African-American homeschoolers' experiences and perspectives, black feminist theorists Patricia Hill Collins (1998) and Katherine McKittrick (2006) provide additional nuance. Cautioning against the tendency to render the margin "a flattened theoretical space," Collins argues that "the margin" ought not metaphorically represent exclusionary stasis, nor carry with it an image of people on the periphery (2006, pp. 90–91). Instead, she suggests we ought to understand marginality as a fluid space encapsulating constant movement across boundaries, with members both deliberately and consequentially interacting with central processes of power and oppression simultaneously. McKittrick adds to Collins' argument, requesting, "the need to think about theoretical spaces of the margin simultaneously 'hemming in' and flattening out black women's geographies … Ways of being, real lives, seeing, creating, oppositional discourses, resistances--these are indicative of black women's everyday struggles" (p. 56). These "everyday struggles" are made possible by the fluidity of the margin, as understood by Collins' and McKittrick's reconceptualization.

As homeschooler Daria Woodson utilizes a discourse of protest to describe her homeschooling decision, the act of protest symbolizes the struggle and agency of acknowledging racial marginalization and institutional hegemony, yet deliberately maneuvering around them. This suggests reconsidering the idea of liberation, often understood as the binary opposite to marginalization. Instead, I argue that liberation involves the greater realization of, and navigation across, boundaries only identifiable in the marginal space. Reframing homeschooling as a protest provides a proverbial "link of passage" between normative schooling ideologies and their critiques. In this sense, the act of the protest represents liberation itself.

Understanding that black homeschooling can serve as a critique of, and liberation from, marginalizing processes of school-related racism creates a wider portrait of the scope of homeschooling families than the neoliberal critiques afford. Often, research addressing the homeschooling movement set aside Afrocentric perspectives and black homeschoolers as separate categories, non-representative of homeschooling's influence (Apple, 2000, 2006, 2013; Aurini & Davies, 2005; Lubienski, 2003; Reich, 2002). Because homeschooling is largely perceived as a private endeavor opposed to public schooling (Apple, 2000; Avery-Grubel, 2009; Hanson-Thiem, 2007), black homeschoolers are often isolated to a tiny fraction of the homeschooling margin. Subsequently, dominant white homeschooling trends are viewed as having a greater influence upon traditional schooling systems and society (Apple, 2000, 2013; Lubienski, 2003; Reich, 2002). These problematic tendencies to minimize the impact of black homeschooling, particularly the erasure of African American homeschooling accounts among theoretical critiques of homeschooling, exemplifies McKittrick's (2006) notion of the oppressive "flattening" of black experiences. Drawing insights from black feminist scholars not only compels researchers to consider the complexity among homeschooling motivations, but also provides a lens through which to identify reductionist, hegemonic systems of knowledge production that tend to relegate black experiences to the margin

Methods

As a resident of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, my decision to conduct an ethnographic study of African-American homeschooling families in the city was not only a reflection of my personal circumstances, but also a key site to explore these dynamics. Over the past several years, controversial budget cuts have plagued the School District of Philadelphia, resulting in school closures,[3] staff firings,[4] and major cuts to resources, extracurriculars, and art and music programs.[5] Relatedly, Philadelphia has also been recently featured in various media outlets for its growing African-American homeschooling population. One piece published in March 2017 refers to the exodus of black families from public schools into charter schools, private schools, and homeschooling as "The Second Great Migration."[6]

Additionally, Dr. Ama Mazama of Philadelphia's Temple University has conducted research into the African-American homeschooling movement from an Afrocentric perspective. I frequently relied upon Mazama and Musumunu's (2015) text, *African Americans and Homeschooling: Motivations, Opportunities, and Challenges*, as well as Cheryl Fields-Smith and Wells Kisura (2013) qualitative study to shape my study methodology and inform my question framing. Both of these studies point to the scarcity of existing research examining African American homeschooling; my study intends to address a portion of that void.

The study included three main phases which involved participant observations with six families,[7] 16 interviews with parents from 15 households,[8] and nine youth interviews.[9] The total duration of the formal research lasted 20 months, from May 2016 to December 2017. However, even to this day, I still meet with several participating families from the project on an informal basis.

In May 2016, I began the first phase of participant observation research with two families and recruited four additional families by December of 2016. The participant observation granted me the opportunity to build relationships with these six homeschooling families by visiting their homes; sitting in on their homeschooling lessons; attending field trips and events orchestrated by/for homeschooling families; visiting families on playgrounds, libraries, and recreation centers; meeting parents for coffee; and providing rides with my family's minivan. I only attended the events, trips, playdates, and lessons to which I was openly invited or granted permission. The total duration of participant observation formally lasted from May 2016 through December of 2017.

The second phase of my research involved semi-structured interviews with 16 African-American homeschooling parents from 15 households across Philadelphia. Ten of the interviewed parents I had only met twice or three times prior to scheduling an interview, compared to the six families with whom I had met frequently for a full year before interviewing. I asked participating parents about their own educational experiences, the factors that contributed to their decision to homeschool, aspects of their homeschooling routines, their perspectives on the purpose of education, ways they could suggest improving systems of public education, and other relevant questions that developed organically from participant responses. As researcher Debra Kirschner (2008) discovered conducting her dissertation research, many parents have been influenced by certain educational

[3]https://whyy.org/articles/in-philadelphias-education-crisis-who-is-harmed/.
[4]https://philadelphia.cbslocal.com/2014/09/08/philadelphia-public-school-students-return-to-class-amid-budget-crisis/.
[5]http://www2.philly.com/philly/education/why-do-some-philly-schools-have-rich-arts-programs-and-others-none-at-all-arts-mapping-cultural-education-instrumental-music-orchestra-art-20171017.html.
[6]http://phillys7thward.org/2017/03/second-great-migration-black-families-embracing-school-choice/.
[7]Of the participant observation research with six homeschooling families, one family identifies as "black," one family identifies as "African American," one family identifies as "Caribbean," one family identifies as "Half African, Half White" due to an interracial marriage, one family identifies as "Half black, Half Hispanic" due to an interracial marriage, and one family identifies as "Mixed"-– a white couple who adopted two children of color.
[8]Of the 15 homeschooling families interviewed, six families identify as "black," four families identify as "African American," one family identifies as "Caribbean," one family identifies as "Half black, Half White" due to an interracial marriage, one family identifies as "Half African, Half White" due to an interracial marriage, one family identifies as "Half black, Half Hispanic" due to an interracial marriage, and one white mother was also interviewed who homeschools her two adopted children of color.
[9]Of the nine youth participants, three youth identify as "black," two youth identify as "Half African, Half White," three youth identify as "Half black, Half Hispanic," and one youth identifies as "Korean."

philosophies that undergird their homeschooling approaches. I additionally included questions about homeschooling philosophies, texts, and other theorists that informed or aided their homeschooling journey.

Recruitment of these 15 families occurred at various homeschooling events around Philadelphia as advertised through Facebook, internet groups, and through snowball sampling. I attended some of the recurring homeschooling activities multiple times before actively recruiting in an effort to build relationships. In the end, the interviews conducted with the six parents from the participant observation portion of the study resulted in longer and richer interviews due to the extent of our familiarity and frequency of communication; moreover, many of my informal conversations with both parents and youth throughout the participant observations helped to inform later interview sessions in the summer and fall of 2017.

Because youth perspectives are largely absent from qualitative studies of African-American homeschooling perspectives, I deliberately incorporated youth interviews and observations into my study design. The third phase of research involved interviews with nine homeschooled youth whom I recruited from four of the six families involved in the participant observation phase of the research. This recruitment strategy was a practical one, given the frequency of interactions and level of friendliness between myself and the youth participants with whom I had known over a year at the point of the interview. The nine youth interviewed ranged in age from eight to 15 and were only interviewed upon both parental and youth permission. I asked youth to talk about their favorite topics to study, positive/negative opinions of homeschooling, daily routines (if any), comparisons between homeschooling and their previous school experiences (if they previously attended a traditional school), views on the purpose of education, as well as suggestions for improving the public education system. Similar to the experiences of parental interviews, the interviews with the nine youth with whom I had established relationships similarly allowed me to cater specific questions to each individual, allowing for a more fruitful conversation.

Findings: Insights from black homeschooling families and youth in Philadelphia

Section I: "Like many parents, I began homeschooling because I was tired, angry, and frustrated..."

Many scholars address how the social processes influencing parental schooling decisions are rooted in class differences (Aurini & Davies, 2005; Ball & Reay, 1997; Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2002; Quirke, 2003; Wrigley, 1989). However, African-American families across socioeconomic contexts experience similar impediments that differ sometimes quite drastically from the schooling decisions white families face when deciding how and where to educate their children (Mazama & Lundy, 2012, 2013, 2015).

Frustrating nationwide trends present dilemmas for African-American families across the United States; research has shown how black youth in schools are more likely to receive lower-quality facilities, fewer educational resources, overcrowded classrooms, a lack of diverse course offerings and extracurricular activities, inexperienced teachers, more frequent special education placements and disability assessments, harsher and more frequent punishments compared to white peers, and Eurocentrically-focused curricula with test-driven pedagogies (Diamond, 2007; Fassett & Warren, 2005; Logan, Minca, & Adar, 2012; Mandell, Davis, Bevans, & Guevara, 2008; Mazama & Lundy, 2012, 2013, 2015; Sum, Khatiwada, & McLaughlin, 2009; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009; Wright, 2009).

However, scholars Fields-Smith and Wells Kisura (2013) draw attention to an even more racially-specific crisis that "white people don't have"; namely, African Americans face an immense uphill battle to protect their children from harmful racial stereotypes, particularly the negative prejudices regarding black children's academic abilities (Fields-Smith & Wells Kisura, 2013, pp. 273–274, 279–280). Representations across television, film, and popular music, as well as the educational rhetoric of the "achievement gap," all contribute to problematic, often subliminally internalized, negative beliefs about African Americans. Some of these debilitating stereotypes suggest that black

students lack intelligence or the desire to learn, possess innate tendencies towards laziness or passivity, and are naturally prone to criminality and academic failure (Brown, 2015; Fassett & Warren, 2005; Feagin, 2010; Ferguson, 2010; Fields-Smith & Wells Kisura, 2013, 2013; Kunjufu, 1982; Mazama & Lundy, 2012, 2015; Penn-Nabrit, 2003; Taylor, 2005).

Frustration with negative racial stereotypes was a frequent topic of conversation in my interviews with parents. African-American homeschooling mother Ashaki Dawes shared insight into the culture of low expectations that she encountered at her son's previous school. Ashaki explained as follows:

> Believe me, I get it, there are a lot of demands on teachers and they have to accommodate many students at once … But my Aaron was the only African American boy in his class and there was this perception that if he's antsy during lessons, and moving all around, we have to have a parent-teacher meeting where I'm told I have to get him diagnosed for ADHD. When I asked what [the students] were learning, [the teachers] said: "The alphabet, letter sounds, word phonics…" and I laughed saying, "He already knows all that! He's reading at home, so he's just bored." But no, [the teachers said,] "He's the only one in class exhibiting such active behavior." Well, rather than [the teachers] challenge him [with additional work,] or believe what I'm saying that he knows those things already, they want to diagnose him with ADHD … (*"Ashaki Dawes,"* 15 June 2017)

Even after explaining to his teachers that already being able to read could have contributed to Aaron's boredom and antics during the phonics lessons, Ashaki felt frustrated when her son's teachers continued to insist that Aaron ought to be tested for a clinical diagnosis. Ashaki recognized that her son stood out racially; this difference led her to believe that Aaron's race affected the way his teachers dwelled upon Aaron's behaviors instead of trying to better understand the extent of his academic abilities.

A 2008 study investigating the high percentage of black students enrolled in special education placements with various types of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional diagnoses identified latent racial biases that significantly impacted the referral process (Mandell et al., 2008). This study contributes to a growing body of literature that acknowledges the higher rates of black students' diagnoses, medication prescription rates, and "pull-out" accommodations in schools. On the surface, increased accommodations might seem commendable and advantageous to improve students' learning outcomes, but studies have shown concerning implications due to the diagnosis procedure's susceptibility to biases and lack of standardization (Cartledge & Dukes, 2009; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Mandell et al., 2008; Mazama & Lundy, 2012; Sum et al., 2009). Particularly, special education placements "negatively impact students' attainment of improved academic standing, as well as African American students' life chances" (Mazama & Lundy, 2012: p. 728).

Six-and-a-half-year-old African-American student Landon Byrd received multiple diagnoses of ADHD, sensory-processing disorder, and hyperactivity disorder in the school system. However, his mother Danielle Byrd explained how his diagnoses actually helped her better understand how Landon's mind worked and served partially as the catalyst to try educating him at home. Danielle wanted to personally experiment with new ways to tailor lessons to Landon's strengths and to challenge him more deeply than she felt the school context could allow.

The Byrd's homeschooling journey eventually led Danielle to a realization that translated to a philosophical critique of the way schools are structured as "… simply impersonal institutions" (*"Danielle Byrd,"* 3 July 2017). Danielle strongly believes that students ought to be surrounded by people who care deeply for them-– particularly caregivers who exhibit capability-based mentalities of each child's potential to maximize growth. Over time, watching Landon work through problems and surpass the public school standards through homeschooling helped motivate Danielle to consider school reform options that possibly could optimize student learning more generally: "I would love the public education system to work with parents more … At home I know he'll be challenged. Do you think your school will be able to make the modifications that you [as a parent] see as important?" (*"Danielle Byrd,"* 3 July 2017)

Danielle's final rhetorical question reveals a resonating concern that was also held by Ashaki Dawes and several other African-American homeschooling parents who shared with me their

experiences and concerns from when their children attended traditional schools. Knowing her son and valuing the way he learns differently, Danielle attributes Landon's successes to the importance of their special connection and questions whether this type of caring relationship is "ever attainable in a school setting" ("*Danielle Byrd,*" 3 July 2017). Similarly, Fields-Smith & Wells-Kisura's (2013) research with African-American homeschooling respondents revealed a common parental belief that learning is predicated upon having an instructor who cares deeply about each student, values and incorporates each students' abilities, and also pushes students to their "true potential" (Fields-Smith & Wells Kisura, 2013: p. 273).

In her book, *Subtractive Schooling*, researcher Angela Valenzuela (2010) argues that rigid Eurocentric standards and efficiency-model ideologies translate to uncaring school environments for students of color. She suggests that such learning contexts "are structured formally and informally in ways that fracture students' cultural and ethnic identities" (p. 5). This "fracturing" of ethnic identity, particularly the tendency for schools to "ignore or marginalize the cultural and historical depth of African American children," (Mazama & Lundy, 2012: p. 726), largely impacts the ways black youth view their own academic capabilities and self-worth (Kirklin, 1989). Ironically, studies have shown that students tend to perform better academically based more on the quality of their peer and staff relationships, perceptions of abilities, and culturally-responsive learning contexts than schools' emphases on test-driven pedagogies (Diamond, 2007; Fowler-Finn, 2003; Sadowski, 2008; Valenzuela, 2010; Wright, 2009).

The rigid Eurocentric structuring of public school institutions can create uncaring, impersonal, and at times, hostile environments for students of color (Mazama & Lundy, 2012, 2015; Valenzuela, 2010). Combined with pervasive stereotypes of black youth (Fields-Smith & Wells Kisura, 2013), many African-American parents are reevaluating traditional schools as the default educational option for their children. Stefanie, homeschooling mother of four, adds, "I don't know if the school system, because it's based on a business model, if they have the capability, or even the desire, to truly want each student [to excel.] It's a shame" ("*Stefanie Parker,*" 22 June 2017). Structures of institutional racism and experiences of marginalization in the school system are important facets contributing to African American homeschooling decisions. These perspectives contribute to an understanding of homeschooling *in response to* social inequalities, rather than understanding homeschooling as always a privileged educational choice *contributing to* social inequalities.

Section II: "The decision to homeschool for many families is far from easy."

Despite the institutional and structural challenges permeating the traditional U.S. school system, many parents carefully weigh educational options and consider the ideological, logistical, financial, relational, and emotional sacrifices that homeschooling entails before jumping into the decision (Romm, 1993; Stevens, 2009). Understanding the scope of these challenges helps provide a comprehensive portrait of diverse homeschooling experiences among African-American families.

There are many reasons for why black families sometimes face hardships when making the decision to homeschool. One factor is the ways in which family, friends, peers, and neighbors vocalize an opposition to homeschooling (Fields-Smith & Wells Kisura, 2013). Many parents also recognize their own struggles overcoming deeply-held beliefs about homeschooling as a white trend, and the stereotypical notion that homeschooling would socially disservice their children (Mazama & Lundy, 2012, 2015). Some families feel torn grappling with the decision to leave an institution that has symbolically represented a major Civil Rights victory due to the hard-fought battle for racial integration (Fields-Smith & Wells Kisura, 2013). Many negative perceptions and stereotypes surround homeschooling, adding an extra burden upon African-American homeschooling families to prove their legitimacy in a context where their parenting and educational choices are already subject to question (Fields-Smith & Wells Kisura, 2013).

Like many families who are the first in their familial and friend networks to express an interest in homeschooling, young black couple Miles and Ruth Stewart recounted the challenges they faced

having to defend the idea of homeschooling their six children. The Stewarts' extended families on both sides were unfamiliar with homeschooling and worried about the ramifications for the children's academic outcomes. Their main concern involved questioning how the Stewarts would match the academic pace of traditional schools and how the children's learning progress would be measured while at home. Ruth stressed the importance of having "proof" of her children's above-average test scores to appease her family's constant inquiries (*"Ruth Stewart,"* 8 August 2016).

A few researchers have provided insight into the tendency for black homeschoolers like Ruth and Miles Stewart to utilize what some label as "school-at-home" techniques (Fields-Smith & Wells Kisura, 2013; Mazama & Lundy, 2015; Romm, 1993). One of the earliest qualitative case studies of African-American homeschoolers by Tracy Romm involved interviews and observations with eight homeschooling families in Atlanta in the early 1990s. Even though she recognizes that the diversity of homeschooling philosophies and approaches were too numerous to neatly categorize, Romm found that African-American homeschoolers generally tended to be highly-structured with regimented routines, structured activities, worksheets, and frequently relied upon progress testing measures, somewhat mirroring traditional school environments (Romm, 1993).

The 2013 study conducted by Fields-Smith and Wells-Kisura includes an analysis of the "school-at-home" mentalities commonly employed by African-American homeschooling families: "Although homeschooling should provide academic freedom, black families frequently experience pressure to provide their children with extensive structure to ensure that their children will be well-perceived in society" (Fields-Smith & Wells Kisura, 2013: p. 268). These researchers find that not only do African-American families worry about the perceptions and successes of their children in a culture laden with racial stereotypes, but black homeschooling parents tend to face an extra hurdle defending and producing concrete results to "provide legitimacy" for this relatively unknown education path of homeschooling that many people in broader society (i.e., employers, universities, formal training institutions, etc.) may view as experimental at best (pp. 275–276).

A similar story unfolded when I talked with Felicia Davidson, African-American homeschooling mother of four. Felicia did feel initial support from her closest family members, but encountered negative feedback and opposition from various people, including her own self-doubt along the way. Although Felicia acknowledges that she thrives on structure, planning, and organization in general, she admits that part of her structured homeschooling routine helps legitimize what she is doing to ease her own mind:

> I went in thinking, okay, I've got to have a schedule. So I looked at Jaden's kindergarten schedule from when he started, and I tried to mimic that. Like, he's gonna need the structure, so we gotta do breakfast from 8 am to 9 am, and then we should do ABCs and circle time from 9 am to 10 am. And then he should have free time. Okay, so now it's ten o'clock, so I said that we're gonna do the free time. I was so scared. You just kind of feel like … I'm gonna make a mistake! I went online to the [Facebook] homeschooling groups at one point, like, I'm not sure if I made the right decision [to homeschool]! (*"Felicia Davidson,"* 5 June 2017)

The riskiness of homeschooling is a common perception that often translates to anxiety that many African Americans feel when they consider homeschooling, sometimes resulting in highly-structured homeschooling routines. Others may decide to homeschool only one or two children while the others attend traditional school, engage in a short-term "trial" commitment to homeschooling, or try out many different homeschooling methodologies/philosophies to mitigate internal tensions (Mazama & Musumunu, 2015).

Curious how Felicia found out about homeschooling, I asked her to talk more about her initial experiences that led to the decision to educate Jaden at home. Felicia described her experience stumbling across black homeschoolers when searching YouTube for supplemental educational activities for Jaden. "Homeschooling has always been really weird to me," she said. "And so I never really thought about it, and I started seeing videos [of the black homeschooling families] and I'm like, this is actually really, really cool" (*"Felicia Davidson,"* 5 June 2017).

Felicia was startled to discover diverse homeschoolers, particularly homeschooling families who resembled her family racially and socially. Popular notions of homeschoolers as white, sheltered,

religious, middle-class families living in isolated suburban/rural areas were sometimes noted as initial limitations that prevented many of the African-American families in this study to consider homeschooling. Kelley Herbert, African-American homeschooling mother of two, said in exasperation, "One of the first questions people ask is, 'Oh … [your son is] homeschooled?' 'I didn't know Black people did that!' Or. 'Oh, you live in the city? You know he can go to X, Y, or Z school down the street?' And then … 'How does he get socialization?' " ("*Kelley Herbert,*" 2 May 2017).

Not surprisingly, perceptions of homeschoolers as largely white and rural/suburban aptly reflect traditional homeschooling demographic trends. Census data from the U.S. Department of Education 2012 report found homeschooled youth accounted for 3.4% of the total youth population, with an increase of 62% overall between 2003 and 2012 (USDE, 2012). Four years later, the same federally-funded census study found homeschooled youth account for a similar 3.3% of the total youth population, but response rates were lower and confidence intervals may in fact indicate a rate of homeschool growth between 2012 and 2016 (Ray, 2018). According to the 2016 survey, 59% of the U.S. homeschooled youth population identified as white, whereas 26% identified as Hispanic, 8% identified as black, and 3% identified as Asian or Pacific Islander (USDE, 2016, p. 18). Also, according to the 2016 report, 61% of homeschoolers across demographics lived in suburban or rural areas of the United States compared to the 29% of homeschoolers living in urban cities, and 79% of homeschooling parental income totaled above the poverty threshold (2016, p. 18).

These statistics support the longstanding association between homeschooling and whiteness, economic privilege, and non-urban contexts. However, additional studies have revealed notable growth among African-American homeschoolers and also among urban homeschoolers (Ray, 2015, 2018). A study conducted by the National Home Education Research Institute around the same time as the 2016 census found that the African-American homeschooling population had grown to over 220,000 families, an increase to 10% of the total homeschooling population (Ray, 2015). Researchers Fields-Smith and Wells Kisura estimate that due to the scarcity of scholarly attention researching African-American homeschoolers, U.S. black homeschoolers could actually be closer to 15% of the total homeschooling population and may have been a vibrant trend since the 1980s (Fields-Smith & Wells Kisura, 2013, pp. 265, 269).

Because most data about homeschoolers tends to be quantitative and often utilizes written surveys and interview questionnaire sheets,[10] most literature tends to overlook the difficult transitional period that families face when switching from traditional schooling to homeschooling. Relations can become strained between spouses, friends, and family members; homeschooling routine configurations involve immense logistical and financial sacrifices; and philosophical burdens weigh on the consciences of parents as they make key educational decisions (Stevens, 2009).

Choosing to homeschool anyway: Cultivating positive ethnic identity

Even though homeschooling parents across racial and socioeconomic demographics may face challenges when grappling with the homeschooling decision, studies of black homeschooling families showcase how the eventual appreciation for culturally-relevant pedagogy and building healthy constructs of ethnic identity often supersede the hardships of the initial decision (Mazama & Musumunu, 2015). Similarly, single-mom Frieda Cartiers expresses some of the hardships naturally coinciding with homeschooling, but more so, she emphasizes the *importance* of homeschooling to help her daughter and nephew cultivate a healthy ethnic identity:

> [Homeschooling] can get overwhelming … and … most homeschoolers have this fear, even if not overt, which is the fear that you're not giving [the children] all that they need. Not doing enough for them, it's not enough.

[10]Many studies, particularly quantitative-based reports, encourage parents to rank reasons for homeschooling by referring to a pre-constructed bulleted list (Isenberg, 2007; Van Galen, 1991). The U.S. Department of Education particularly utilizes this approach; in 2016, the number one reason parents homeschooled was due to "dissatisfaction with the environment of other schools" (USDE, 2016) which is a broad category that my research seeks to further interrogate.

> But because of the schools and the way they teach aren't conducive for African-Americans, Latinos, Africans, even Asians … [Traditional school settings] are not really conducive [to cultivating ethnic identity] in the same way homeschooling can allow. What is talked about in the classroom is very minimal … you're in this box … Don't go outside of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X … ! Don't go outside of Harriet Tubman. That's what you got. But there's more than that. (*"Frieda Cartiers,"* 1 June 2017)

Even as Frieda recognizes how homeschooling can "get overwhelming" and raise fears about her competencies as an educator, she also believes that homeschooling is the most conducive educational environment to support her daughter and nephew in cultivating their ethnic identity. It is important to investigate the depth and diversity of the obstacles different homeschooling families face in order to not draw conclusions of a homogenous experience among black homeschoolers. Theorist Katherine McKittrick compels researchers to take into account "Black women's everyday struggles," which acknowledges the idea that resisting oppression takes on many forms and endures many sacrifices (McKittrick, 2006). As participant Daria Woodson suggests, homeschooling can be viewed as a form of liberation for African-American families whose experiences of marginalization in the traditional school system lead them to circumvent the system entirely. This bold stance of resistance provides a valuable critique of current educational inequalities, blurring the boundaries of private and public through the radical act of homeschooling-as-protest.

Section III: Black youth perspectives of schooling and homeschooling

Although several studies have shed light upon the ways youth creatively assert critiques of their schooling experiences, these same studies also recognize that this phenomenon demands further scholarly attention (Brown, 2015; Chin, 2001; Ferguson, 2010; Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Lewis, 2003; Nolan, 2011; Valenzuela, 2010). My interviews with nine homeschooled youth offer insight into the varying ways black youth mitigate marginalizing experiences of school-related racism; therefore, similar to how I earlier argued for parent homeschooler perspectives as substantive critiques of racially oppressive systems, youth perspectives of school injustices ought to be viewed as similarly legitimate and also warrant consideration among education reform debates.

Most people assume that the decision to homeschool is driven by the parents; however, African American eight-year-old Helen Matthews expressed how witnessing an injustice in her school contributed to her interest in being homeschooled. Adopted into a white family with also an adopted brother, Helen agreed to be interviewed along with her brother, Simon, and mom, Phoebe, in the midst of their family's first homeschooling year. Helen's mother, Phoebe, described instances where the school that her children previously attended was "problematically inconsistent" when handling racially-sensitive situations that involved her two adopted children of color. During the interview, eight-year-old Helen provided insight into one particular circumstance:

> The experience that made me want to leave that school for like, ever, was when my teacher went around asking everybody if they needed breakfast, or if they didn't … and she yelled at the kids who said, "maybe" and told them, "There's not enough! You're gonna have to pick if you want breakfast or you don't want breakfast!" And that decision affected if they would get breakfast the whole entire year! I'm like, that's not even fair. And so seeing my friend, Donté, not have breakfast … There were kids who were hungry the next day! So I went around to the other third grade classes like Kadeem's … my brother's … Their teachers never said, "There's not enough!" (*"Helen Matthews,"* age eight, 6 April 2017)

Helen's passion and well-articulated frustration with her teacher's unfair manipulation of a federally-mandated breakfast program provides an illuminating example of how youth notice and respond to perceived inequalities. Not only was Helen frustrated by the situation, but she actively surveyed other students to assess the accuracy of her teacher's claim, "There's not enough breakfast!" Discovering that her teacher stretched the truth about the funds and quantity available, Helen told her mother

about the injustice and expressed a desire to leave school. "Helen was literally coming home from school each day angry, frustrated, or in tears by something that would happen," Phoebe explained in reference to her daughter's account, indicating that Helen witnessed and experienced unjust circumstances on multiple occasions.

For youth participants like Helen Matthews who had previously attended traditional forms of schooling, I asked youth to give specific examples of positive and negative aspects of their schooling and homeschooling experiences. Ten-year-old Brandon Riley and his eight-year-old sister Lily shared that they both preferred homeschooling over their previous school for reasons mostly related to freedom. "At homeschool, I learn a lot more than at my other school," Brandon stated. "I just like that I have the freedom, I can pick what I want to do, I don't have to raise my hand to do stuff…" Lily interrupted with, "I like the freedom to go on mommy's computer whenever I want! I miss the candy at school, that's it." Brandon then explained how at their previous school, students were given candy for "being good" and were given "numbers in red pen" that led to detention if they broke rules, talked out of turn, or generally misbehaved. After describing the discipline system, Brandon paused momentarily and added, "Yeah. They treated us like animals. You just need a lot less people in one classroom" (*"Brandon Riley,"* age 10, 25 July 2017).

Brandon's succinct reflection upon the animal-like treatment he received in school was based upon the reward/punishment systems his teachers implemented to accommodate many students at once. However, Brandon's comment that, "You just need a lot less people in one classroom," evokes a broader structural critique of schooling where class sizes are often too large, making circumstances difficult for teachers to treat each individual humanely.

Researching schools across Chicago, researcher John Diamond (2007) identified similar processes of dehumanizing behavior management systems in schools with predominantly African-American and working-class populations. Comparatively, white and middle-class students more often experienced smaller class sizes; greater exposure to innovative, interactive pedagogies; and teachers who sought to "foster autonomy, self-direction, and higher-order thinking skills" (Diamond, 2007, pp. 288–289). Differences in ideologies and pedagogies across schools based on racial and socioeconomic demographics subsequently perpetuate processes of social inequality. "African American and working-class students often receive instruction that is practically oriented; involves more memorization and recitation; and prepares them for manual, clerical, or low-wage service-sector work" (2007, p. 287). Even though critics of homeschooling argue for its problematic role in perpetuating inequalities, many families turn to homeschooling to avoid racially-segregated schools that utilize didactic pedagogies and set low expectations for African Americans and their futures (Mazama & Lundy, 2012).

Both Helen and Brandon's first-hand experiences with school-related injustices translate to insightful critiques that speak to greater systems of educational inequality. Still, even homeschooled youth who never experienced traditional schools may have insights into reforming public school institutions. Of the nine youth I interviewed, four had switched to homeschooling at some point in their elementary-aged or pre-teen years, while five had never attended a brick-and-mortar school. All nine students, however, provided detailed responses when asked about suggestions for ways they would improve public schools.

Even though 12-year-old Ella Woodson and her 10-year-old sister Ruby had never been enrolled in a traditional school, their insights about school through their friends' experiences and discussions with their parents granted them an appreciation for being homeschooled. "In school," Ella stated, "kids might not learn about slavery or injustices until something like 2nd or 3rd grade! And when they learn it they might not think it's even true. But my mom taught us early on, the truth. So I'm just really grateful" (*"Ella Woodson,"* age 12, 23 August 2017).

Studies have shown that teachers may purposely delay or avoid topics of race in the classroom for various reasons, some of which include the fact that many teachers are ill-equipped to navigate cultivated conversations about race (Hilliard, 1995). There are also concerns that drawing attention to race will spur classroom conflicts (Bronson & Merryman, 2009; Modica, 2015). Ironically, the lack

of open discussion surrounding race as early as kindergarten often exacerbates classroom racial tensions, conflicts, and peer stereotyping (Bronson & Merryman, 2009).

In a later portion of my interview with siblings Ella and Ruby Woodson, both sisters expressed their frustrations about how the dramatic cuts to school funding across the School District of Philadelphia translated to unfair conditions for students of color particularly. Ruby began the conversation: "Our friend Chelsea said she got [computer lab class] taken away. But she was just happy when sports weren't taken away, that means basketball wasn't taken away. She loves basketball!" ("*Ruby Woodson,*" age 10, 23 August 2017). Ella responded to Ruby's account by comparing funding and resources offered in schools and prisons:

> It's totally not fair that prisons get [diverse types of] funded programs and someone's school may be so bad … In prison, they have art, they have computer labs … there are plays … You can have school in prison and prison in school. Because some of my friends say school is prison. They're really just setting up kids in poorer neighborhoods, they're trying to set up kids to go to prison. They just say: "Hey take this test at fifth grade," they see if you're gonna go to prison when you're older. And that's not fair at all. In ___ neighborhood, (a tree-lined affluent neighborhood on the peripheries of Philadelphia), they don't do that [i.e., remove programs and resources.] Those are the rich schools, and that's not fair. It's really not. ("*Ella Woodson,*" age 12, 23 August 2017)

Ella's analysis and critique of the "prison and school" link reflects a host of scholarly research that showcases similar dismal conclusions about youth of color and the criminal justice system (Ferguson, 2010; Mazama & Lundy, 2012, 2013, 2015; NYCLU, 2010; Nolan, 2011). Policies implementing "zero tolerance" and "war on drugs" campaigns have translated into harsh disciplinary regimes within schools, including the existence of police officers in hallways and the frequent process of turning over school-related offenses to the judicial system (Mazama & Lundy, 2012; Morris, 2016; Nolan, 2011). Punitive consequences to school-based infractions have consistently been shown to target black and working-class youth (Ferguson, 2010; Mazama & Lundy, 2012; Morris, 2016; New York Civil Liberties Union. (NYCLU), 2010; Nolan, 2011; Sum et al., 2009). Ella Woodson not only demonstrates an awareness of the school-to-prison link, but she also indignantly points to the injustice that "rich schools" are privileged in their avoidance of funding and resource cuts.

Incorporating homeschooled youth perspectives into research provides a more complex understanding of the motivations behind families' decisions to homeschool. Perspectives and accounts that aptly critique injustice, regardless of the critic's age, offer legitimate beacons of insight when it comes to ameliorating educational inequalities. Youth perspectives ought to more loudly echo throughout discussions of education reform, and should be appreciated as important, valuable contributions to educational collaboration and research.

Discussion

Many critics of homeschooling suggest that the movement stems from the same neoliberal ethos that typically characterizes ideologies of economic privatization and further perpetuates social inequalities in the public sphere (Avery-Grubel, 2009; Ball, 1998; Hanson-Thiem, 2007; Lubienski, 2003; Stein, 2001; Whitty & Edwards, 1998). However, all too often, these critiques paint too broad of a picture in their application to all homeschoolers, especially when generalizing homeschooling motivations across socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. Other scholars attempt to differentiate black homeschooling's role in society as separate from the dominant role of white homeschooling, the latter being viewed as more influential in altering current social systems (Apple, 2000, 2013; Lubienski, 2003; Reich, 2002). This attempt to ideologically relegate black homeschooling perspectives into a marginal category among homeschooling trends resembles the oppressive "flattening" of black experiences that contribute to hegemonic systems of knowledge production (McKittrick, 2006: p. 56)

Rather than view homeschoolers as existing within a stasis margin, a more nuanced reconceptualization defines a margin of fluidity where the black families who describe their homeschooling as

an act of resistance navigate across boundaries of marginalization into realms of power-through-protest (Collins, 2002; McKittrick, 2006). Comparing homeschooling to an act of protest transcends and transforms the perceived boundedness of privately-operating processes of homeschooling into a new framework of publicly-operating processes of resistance. In this sense, homeschooling grants a unique lens of positionality for many black families to critique and challenge dominant systems of educational inequality.

My recent study with African-American homeschooling families in Philadelphia was methodologically framed based upon the lack of existing qualitative studies that draw attention to black homeschoolers' experiences. Black youth perspectives are particularly absent from scholarship. This study's three phases of research incorporated aspects of participant observations, parent interviews, and youth interviews to highlight diverse perspectives across age categories. Drawing insights from black feminist theory to interpret the research findings, I have sought to draw attention to the diversity of hardships many families face when deciding to homeschool, how experiences with school-related marginalization are often contributing factors to African Americans' decisions to homeschool, and how youth perspectives offer a unique contribution to understandings of homeschooling motivations.

A few limitations inherent to my study design leave potential for future research. Given this study's small sample size, narrow geographic scope within the city limits of Philadelphia, and lack of male parent participants, additional studies could account for these factors and provide even further depth of insight into black homeschooling perspectives. Homeschooling research in general would also greatly benefit from incorporating perspectives from other ethnic and racial groups; for instance, the notable growth of Hispanic homeschoolers across the United States is worth further research. Overall, drawing attention to diverse experiences helps provide complex understandings into how homeschooling operates in broader U.S. society.

Author bio

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