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**ON THE FIELD OF SCHOOL CHOICE: CONVERSATIONS CAPTURING  
WHITE MIDDLE CLASS MATERNAL PRIVILEGE: A CASE STUDY**

by

Jill Tabachnick Levi

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
College of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirement

For the degree of  
Doctor of Education

at

Rowan University

November 26, 2019

Dissertation Chair: MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.

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## **Dedications**

I dedicate my dissertation work to my children, my husband, my parents, sisters, family, friends, neighbors, and communities. I dedicate this work to all of the people who have pushed me and encouraged me and taught me. I especially dedicate this work to my grandmother who sat with me and gave me her time and her interest. For you Bobby....

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor Dr. MaryBeth Walpole. She offered steady guidance and I am incredibly grateful for her efforts.

To David, who remained a source of comfort and encouragement during this long and difficult process. And has remained my best friend in life. Thank you my love.

To my children, Julian, Caleb, and Leni for remaining confident in my abilities. The beauty of children is their optimism. These three cheered me on each time I stumbled and I am so grateful to have my team of three.

I am grateful to my mother and father who cheered me on and wanted this for me because I wanted it for myself. To my older sister Lauren, a constant source of love and sound advice. And especially to Cara, a fellow writer, who guided me on a near daily basis through the ups and downs of the writing process, who pushed me forward when I wanted to quit and who sees my own abilities clearer than I see my own.

To my friends, the Goldbergs and the Burns' whose love and support has proven invaluable. Thank you. To Grabow, who listened and encouraged me all of these eight years and beyond. To Dawn, who proofread my graduate school application essays and let me talk to her about all things dissertation whenever I needed to. And to all of my friends who cheered me on along the way, I value you all so.

To my first school family at Barratt Middle School, particularly my students Sovandi, Fernanda, Brenda, Quincy, Antwan and Patrick. And to my second school family at ESMS, particularly the gifted teachers Rebecca, Emily, Jay, and Evan who introduced me to the act of reflective teaching. And to David Getz, who may not know how much his leadership continues to inspire me today.

## **Abstract**

Jill Tabachnick Levi

ON THE FIELD OF SCHOOL CHOICE: CONVERSATIONS CAPTURING WHITE  
MIDDLE CLASS MATERNAL PRIVILEGE: A CASE STUDY

2019-2020

MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.

Doctor of Education

This study examined the results of high school choice in a small community through the experiences of White Middle class mothers. In capturing the conversations of these mothers I aimed to make explicit the implicit structures of power inherent in the school choices of this small community. Using a Bourdieuan framework I was able to document ways that the White Middle Class strategize within these structures for their own gains. I was also able to document the ways that these structures advance these strategies often at the expense of those in subordinate positions, and in this country subordinate positions are tied to race. These findings confirm that school choice often benefits those in power and adds to the literature calling for active measures regulating demographics in choice schools.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

My dissertation, a case study, took place in the small town of Leonard where high school choice was introduced in 2011. School choice in this small community has underscored similar issues that echo national concerns including: mounting racial segregation in the local regional high school, a loss of resources to the local regional high school, and a further divide in communities based on social class. The explicit intention of this study was to understand how White Middle Class mothers in Leonard made high school choices for their children. Implicit in this study are the ways that race and social class have shaped these mother's ideas about schools and school choice. The context of school choice in a small town offered a unique vantage point in the literature, which is usually focused in large cities. The role of the mother in her child's education was of particular interest to me as I am a mother, and an educator too. And mothers, particularly White middle class mothers, are the decision makers in their children's educational experiences (Kimelberg, 2014; Lareau, 2011). They hold considerable power to exacerbate divides along racial and class lines during the school choice process (Horvat, 2003; Kimelberg, 2014). Thus, their choices were worthy of documenting and codifying for future educational policies considering school choice measures.

### **Problem Statement**

A case study was crafted to highlight the particular experience of high school choice in Leonard City, known hereafter as Leonard. Several large families have shaped the politics in this small town for many decades. Local families describe Leonard as innocent and safe. Crime is low and it is the sort of town where front doors are left

unlocked. Children ride bikes all over town and Leonard has a feeling of wholesomeness often not felt in many communities today.

The last two decades have seen a rise in second home ownership and the nature of Leonard has changed due to this change in demographics. Two decades earlier the town was mainly populated by year round residents. Currently, the majority of Leonard homes are owned by second home buyers with disposable incomes. In the offseason the population largely decreases and the town is quiet. The local schools have been affected by this demographic shift and in the last decade one school building was closed due to shrinking student populations. Currently, there is additional pressure to further consolidate Leonard schools since the student population has not increased. The local community is concerned about these developments and there have been widespread public discussions regarding the fate of Leonard schools. These discussions are documented in Chapter 4 of this study.

The Leonard school district serves grades K-8. Over 90% of their students are White and no students in the district during the year of the study qualified for free or reduced lunch. Since the physical needs of the students are most often met at home, the district is free to focus on academics and enrichment. Historically the high school sending district for Leonard students has been Western Town High School (WTHS). WTHS draws the majority of its student population from Western Town and in 2019 its demographics were 86% of students of color, who were mainly Black and Hispanic. Sixty-eight percent of students qualified for free or reduced lunch programming, which is higher than the state average. The contrast between the school districts of WTHS and Leonard are stark. However, before school choice programming, most Leonard families



sent their children to WTHS because other options were limited. These options included private schools with varying degrees of financial, religious, and geographic hurdles if one chose to pursue them.

The introduction of school choice into the area gave Leonard families the option of choosing Jewel High School (JHS), a school located in the nearby town of Jewel City, hereafter known as Jewel. Jewel and Leonard have similar racial and economic demographics. Jewel is 91% White and 13% qualify for free or reduced lunch. A comparison of school climate using 2017-2018 district report cards showed that WTHS had 116 acts of violence while JHS had five. While this is a huge discrepancy, the chasm lessens when we look at police reports. WTHS had one incident reported to the police and JHS had two. WTHS had five reported incidents with a weapon while JHS had two. Still, as a Leonard parent concerned about the school climate the difference between WTHS and JHS seems large. There were over one hundred more acts of violence at WTHS than at JHS. I wanted to know then, why Leonard families still willing to choose WTHS. Data collected on the topic of school safety is presented in Chapter 4 and analyzed in Chapter 5.

The Jewel City School District became a choice school district in 2011. According to state policy, choice schools are allowed to admit students from outside their district and the state pays tuition to the receiving district. In turn, the state has the right cap the number of choice seats a school can offer in any given year, which causes a fluctuation in the number of choice seats offered annually. This flux has caused anxiety for Leonard families intent on attending JHS. Concurrently, knowledge about JHS's choice program has spread across local townships and competition for choice seats has

intensified. Currently, it is not solely Leonard students competing for choice seats. However, they remain the bulk of the choice students in the school. One reason for this is that siblings are given special status and those siblings meeting JHS' admission criteria are offered a choice spot ahead of the general lottery system. The general lottery system applies to all remaining qualifying students whom were assigned numbers, which are placed in a ball, and randomly drawn at the public library during an advertised date and time. Members of the community are allowed to attend and several of my participants have done so. Numbers that are not called are put on a waitlist and in years past the entire waitlist made it into JHS. However, as the number of choice applications have increased, the wait list has grown. Currently, if one's number is high it is unlikely to be called. Nevertheless, over the past eight years, the number of choice seats at JHS has remained steady enough that attending it still remains a strong option for Leonard families. And, JHS has remained interested in the Leonard student population for its own reasons since the inception of its choice programming.

A relationship formed between the Jewel and Leonard districts as JHS offered Leonard students a way out of WTHS and Leonard students offered the JHS district greater enrollment numbers. I might add that, as previously noted, the demographics of the districts are similar, a fact that may be appealing to both districts. Like Leonard, Jewel is a town suffering from declining year-round population. It became a choice school district in order to bolster its enrollment numbers and assist in keeping its local schools open. In the early years of the choice program, JHS actively solicited Leonard students through direct marketing campaigns and cultivated relationships amongst school personnel. As the number of Leonard students vying to attend JHS grew, the Leonard

school district worked hard to prepare students for acceptance. This included standardized test readiness and math curriculum focused on helping Leonard students succeed in math at JHS. In return, JHS has remained accessible to Leonard students. At a November, 2016 Board of Education (BOE) meeting, I learned that all Leonard students who applied to JHS in the previous year were accepted (Appendix A). And, at the March, 2017 BOE meeting, the Leonard superintendent and other administrators commented that the math program was strong enough for JHS to find Leonard students well prepared. Finally, the provision of a school bus in the 2017-18 school year funded by the Leonard district for their students attending JHS cemented the ongoing relationship between the two districts. Currently, transportation to JHS, previously a major issue for Leonard families, is a non-issue.

School choice in Leonard mirrors national school choice trends, meaning that White middle and upper middle class families are most able to access choices for their children (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Reay & Lucey, 2003; Reinoso, 2008; Wells, 2014). In Leonard, school choice has meant that families now have the option to attend JHS and are exercising it. When Leonard families leave WTHS, they take both their money and political clout from WTHS. Nationally, we have seen school integration reverse and segregation increase throughout the 1990s and into the millennium (Orfield, Frankenberg, Kuscera & Ee, 2014). Alongside these reversals, school choice has been introduced and serves as a competitive field on which to gain social and economic advantages through attending premium choice schools (Fiel, 2013, 2015). In Leonard, JHS is a premium choice school that many families seek to attend. It is important to this study to document the reasons families choose JHS. Are mothers viewing JHS as more

beneficial for their children and how, if at all, are mothers evaluating their access to these benefits? It is equally important to this study to document the many reasons Leonard families might specifically seek out WTHS, or other alternative schools, to gather the various parental explanations for the rationale behind high school choice in Leonard City.

### **Historical Overview**

To gain a deeper understanding of our current era of school choice and its effects on school segregation today, it is essential to understand the history of school desegregation, including, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, and other notable court cases. An historical overview connects the reader to the past and demonstrates the evolution of school choice policy as a solution meant to foster the desegregation of schools after the Brown vs. Board Era. It also provides a context to understand the current demographics of our nation's schools and the difficulties with changing them. Since school choice policies arose in response to the end of mandated school desegregation, an examination of its history is valuable.

**School desegregation.** The era of school choice came after the legal battles of the 1950's-1990's and was originally intended as a way to organically integrate schools through personal choices (Orfield, et al, 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013). The literature review details legally enforced integration, which took immense effort and was short lived (Kozol, 2005; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield et al., 2014). Several legal battles, detailed in the literature review, shaped school integration. The *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) ruling that separate was in fact unequal, was the beginning of these battles (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Although this decision legally compelled America's schools to integrate, Southern and Northern paths towards integration looked very

different (Chemerinsky, 2003). A decade after *Brown vs. Board*, due to continual activism on its behalf, the South was finally, forcefully compelled to integrate its schools (Chemerinsky, 2003; Orfield et al., 2014). *The Civil Rights Act of 1964*, economic sanctions, and federal armed troops in Little Rock, Arkansas showed the lengths to which federal government was initially willing to go to ensure integration (Chemerinsky, 2003; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014). Busing programs, made legal by the Supreme Court case of *Swann v Charlotte-Mecklenberg Board of Education* (1971) further supported integration by providing a cost efficient and relatively easy way to integrate district schools through transportation (Chemerinsky, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014; Siegal-Hawley, 2014). Though busing programs were hotly contested from their inception, they also meant that steady integration patterns held in the South until court reversals of desegregation programs began in earnest in the 1990's (Chemerinsky, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014).

The Northern path to integration was far more ambiguous and elusive (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Whites simply fled the cities, in part to avoid integrating, and, by 1970, most Northern Whites and Blacks lived in segregated areas (Chemerinsky, 2003; Goyette & Lareau, 2015; Siegal-Hawley, 2014). Three key court findings<sup>1</sup> in the 1970s, which disallowed intra -district busing, shaped the demographics of Northern schools through current times (Chemerinski, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee &

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<sup>1</sup> *Milliken v Bradley I* (1974) the Supreme Court said lower courts could not order desegregation unless district wide intentional segregated practices could be proved. *Keyes v School District I, Denver, CO* placed the burden of proving intentional segregation on the plaintiff. *San Antonio School District v Rodriguez* (1973) tied property taxes to local schools, meaning that low income schools in poor areas would remain perennially underfunded due to their low property taxes.

Kuscera, 2014). These findings meant that most schools in the Northeast and other major metropolitan areas remained untouched by busing, allowing neighborhood choice to shape the diversity of the schools (Chemerinski, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Thus, city schools were populated by a majority of Black and eventually Latino students, while suburban schools remained mostly White (Chemerinski, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014).

The 1990's and early millennium marked a period of Supreme Court reversals of its initial decisions enforcing and bolstering integration in both the North and South<sup>2</sup> (Chemerinski, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield, Frankenberg, Eu & Kuscera, 2014). The decisions of the 1990's sought to give local neighborhoods authority over their schools, and in doing so did away with mandated desegregation plans (Chemerinsky, 2003; Orfield, Frankenberg, Eu & Kuscera, 2014). The results of these decisions led to a reversal in the substantial gains made in Southern schools from intentional desegregation (Chemerinsky, 2003; Orfield, Frankenberg, Eu & Kuscera, 2014). Currently, across the country, the majority of African American and Latino students attend schools where they are the overwhelming majority (Chemerinsky, 2003; Orfield, Frankenberg, Eu & Kuscera, 2014).

**School choice.** School choice, or allowing families to choose schools for their children outside of their district, has had several different iterations over the years (Roda & Wells, 2013). This study looked at school choice reform, which came after the end of legally mandated integration plans in the 1990's. School choice legislation was passed in part to spark diversification in our schools and to take the place of the original, post

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<sup>2</sup> *Board of Education of Oklahoma v Dowell* (1991); *Freeman v Pitts* (1992); *Missouri v Jenkins* (1995)

Brown desegregation plans as well as to create competition among schools (Orfield, 1996; Roda & Wells, 2013). These school choice policies are intentionally color blind, meaning that they do not have policies in place that explicitly require racial diversity (Orfield et al., 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013). Yet, national research clearly shows that organic integration through school choice policies has not worked (Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013). The results of school choice programming have been investigated heavily in the last decade and conclusively shown that school choice does not authentically diversify schools (Brantlinger, 2003; Lareau, Evans & Yee, 2016; Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg & Cucchiara, 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013). In fact, much of the research shows the ways in which school choice has served to help advantaged families gain further advantage in the school system (Demerath, 2009; Fiel, 2015; Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Roda & Wells, 2013). Thus, school choice has not served its original purpose of sparking diversification in schools.

The white middle class and school choice.

**The white middle class and school choice.** Amidst the national, state, and local district responses to school desegregation are choices that individual families make for themselves and their children. The White middle class (WMC) can and often does go to great measures to segregate and to maintain wealth and social class through the educational experiences of its children (Fiel, 2015). The most substantial way that WMC families segregate themselves is through neighborhood choice (Lareau & Goyette, 2015). In 2009, seven out of ten children went to a school in their local districts (Lareau & Goyette, 2015). Hence, the way to guarantee a good district is to deliberately buy a home

in the best area one can afford based on the school district's reputation, and that is the choice most WMC families make (Lareau & Goyette, 2015).

WMC families who consciously make a choice to live in an area without a high-achieving school district must strongly consider what school options are available for their children (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2013). Certainly in decades past, WMC families who remained in an area without a perceived viable school district utilized private school (Renzulli & Evans, 2005). As school choice programming increased in the last fifteen years, choice schools began to emerge that appealed to the WMC families (Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Roda & Wells, 2013). Yet, as appealing choice schools increased, competition for enrollment also increased, and the school choice process became competitive (Fiel, 2015; Horvat, 2013; Roda & Wells, 2013). White middle class families adapted to this competition in a variety of ways in order to get into the school of their choice, correctly positioning their children for academic gains, and resulting professional success (Fiel, 2015; Horvat, 2013; Lareau & Goyette, 2015). White Middle Class families can, and do, utilize school choice in ways that allow them to stay in their desired neighborhoods while still allowing their children to attend mainly White schools and receive a strong education (Lareau & Goyette, 2014; Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Roda & Wells, 2013). Although many families may feel conflicted about accessing the advantages that their class and race have provided them, they still utilize them to position their children in desirable schools (Roda & Wells, 2013).

Within the research documenting the conflicting feelings of the WMC are examples of communities who use their advantages to work towards the collective good of an entire student body (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2013).



A collective group effort has led to positive effects for entire school communities, but working for the whole group also means that parents sometimes must subjugate the needs of their individual child for that greater good (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2013). The literature has found the collective approach to be far less common than an individualistic one (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2013). Most communities of parents consist of individuals or groups of parents seeking to address the needs of, or advance, their individual children rather than address the collective good of the school.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The broad goal of this study sought to understand how White middle class mothers living in Leonard chose a high school for their children. More specifically, I wanted to investigate how these mothers made sense of the advantages of their race and class in the high school choice process (Horvat, 2003). Mothers selected to participate in this study both identified as White and completed at least some college, a strong indicator of middle class status (Pew, 2015). Finally, choosing a school for one's child is loaded with a variety of emotions and experiences including fear of future failures or successes. As a mother and a person interested in the act of mothering, I felt it was important to give a voice to mothers who were engaging in the struggle of school choice and hear their perspectives during this specific time of life.

### **Theoretical Framework**

**Pierre Bourdieu.** The readings for my literature review introduced me to Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist whose theories have influenced the sociology of education, particularly regarding the ways social class shapes a child's school experience

(Horvat, 2003; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Susen & Turner, 2011). While Bourdieu's work did not specifically include race due to his nationality and time period, he certainly would have contextualized race when considering American social class (Horvat, 2003). Thus, race is a central aspect of this study. Bourdieu was concerned with the ways that the individual and the group were shaped by structure and in turn shaped structure (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Horvat, 2003). He documented the everyday actions of the dominant class to reveal that academic and professional advancement could be considered the results of differences in the socialization of youth and their subsequent interactions with cultural institutions (Horvat, 2003; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Lin, 1999; McDonough, Ventresca & Outcalt, 2000). His observations regarding the interactions of the dominant classes with its national institutions such as schools, supported his ideas that institutions were based upon upper class values and thus tended to advance those with higher social class standings (Bourdieu, 1996; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1992; Horvat, 2003; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Lin, 1999). Bourdieu explained that these occurrences are usually unknown to those acting upon them (Lin, 1999). In other words, the dominant class believed their choices and resulting successes were of their own accord while, in fact, institutions and organizations are structured to advance their choices and ensure their accomplishment (Horvat, 2003; Lin, 1999).

Researchers have applied Bourdieu's framework to American education in order to reveal the underlying forces at work in perpetuating the American social class systems (Horvat, 2003; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; McDonough et al., 2000; Susen & Turner, 2011). The relationship between school choice and social class has been exposed through a demonstrated increase in school segregation, as well as, increased competition amongst

the middle class for choice schools (Fiel, 2013/15; Roda & Wells, 2013). Accessibility to top choice schools is easier for those whom are economically privileged, which often aligns with race (Lareau, 2011; Roda & Wells, 2013). This study applied Bourdieu's framework to high school choice in Leonard by illuminating the ways that the mothers were able to use Bourdieu's ideas of practice on the field of high school choice (Bourdieu, 1975; McDonough, 2000; Nash, 1990). This study also seeks out illustrations of symbolic power and violence within Leonard and its high school options. Furthermore, an analysis of the ways the mother's preferences for specific cultural capital influenced their high school choices is included Chapter 5 (Bourdieu, 1975; Horvat, 2003; Nash, 1990).

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is threefold. First it is significant to the current national conversation regarding equity in schools and national school policy, which has started to focus on the implications of school choice on school segregation (Chemersinsky, 2003; Hu, 2018; Orfield, 1996; Orfield, Frankenberg, Eu & Kuscera, 2014). Presently, there is no evidence that the original intention of school choice, to organically alleviate school segregation has done so, and in fact evidence shows school choice actually helps to solidify class and race boundaries in schools (Roda & Wells, 2013). Today's advocates for school integration believe that explicit federal or local oversight is needed to authentically diversify schools (Hu, 2018; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014). Two districts in New York City recently implemented diversity plans that explicitly require diversity in their top performing public schools (Shapiro, 2018). Yet, our Education Secretary, Betsy DeVos has a keen interest in increasing charters, school

vouchers, and choice schools, which means that current research must continue to document the various ways that school choice and social class interact (Reitman, 2017). My research aimed to do this work through detailing White Middle Class mothers' experiences in choosing a high school for their children. Furthermore, it humanizes the experience through the process of interviewing, rather than the often collected numerically based data (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). This research also looks at the experience of high school choice in a small town. This adds a more unusual approach to this kind of research which most often happens in large cities and examines the elementary school choice.

### **Research Questions**

Research questions are designed to give focus to a study (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Yin, 2014). A strong focus is important to delineate the purpose of the study and explain its significance to the reader (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Yin, 2014). Focused research questions form a coherent outline for the project and allow the researcher to complete it in a timely manner (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Yin, 2014). With these objectives in mind, I have designed research questions focused on deciphering the decisions that White Middle Class mothers make regarding high schools. Additionally, research questions needed to consider the ways that race and class influence these choices. Finally, my theoretical framework, largely based upon Bourdieu's theories, are a part of my scope and are reflected in my research questions. Research questions are as follows:

1. How and why do White middle class mothers in Leonard make their specific high school choices for their children?

2. How are these individual choices affected by and shaped by living in Leonard City?
3. How are these choices grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theories of habitus and cultural capital?

### **Definitions**

BOE -Board of Education, in this study it refers to the Leonard Board of Education.

Choice School-A school that students from outside of the district can apply to. The school decides upon its own criteria, for admittance.

Jewel High School (JHS)- the choice high school that many students from Leonard decide to attend in lieu of WTHS. This school is over 90% White. It became a viable school choice for most Leonard students in the last five years.

SES- socioeconomic status. When I use the term “low SES”, I am referring to students or families of low socioeconomic status.

Students of Color-When I use this term I am referring to primarily Black and Latino students. I am not referring to Asian or Native American students unless I specifically say so.

Urban Characteristic school: A school not located in a major (intensive) urban environment or large enough to be an emergent urban school, but faces many challenges of an Urban school, such as increased English language learners (Milner, 2012). WTHS could be classified as an Urban Characteristic school since it is not located in a large city yet shares many of the challenges of an urban school such as low SES status for the majority of students and more safety concerns (Milner, 2012).

Walden City- a city abutting Leonard that boasts a diverse population (de Vries, 2011). Leonard has shown resistance to consolidating with Walden in the past and many continue to publicly reject such considerations.

Western Town High School (WTHS)-the sending district high school for Leonard City. It is over 80% students of color with a 60% Black or Latino student population.

White Middle Class-White refers to self -identification. Middle class has been determined to depend on education status as some college or beyond (Pew, 2015).

Acronym WMC is often used in this piece.

## **Summary**

This chapter has served to introduce the reader to the purpose of my dissertation as an exploration of how White Middle Class mothers in Leonard City make high school choices and to investigate any roles that social class and race play in these choices. Included in this chapter has been an overview of the history of school desegregation, school choice, and White middle class responses to choosing schools. Chapter 2, the literature review, delves deeply into the history of and problems that arise from segregated schools. It also takes a close look at the relationship between school choice and social class reproduction through Bourdieu's theoretical framework. The literature review also offers insight into the mechanisms that orchestrate and shape the White middle class school choice process. Chapter 3, the methodology section, outlines the rationale and strategies of a qualitative, case study design, as well as, examines my position as researcher in this study (Yin, 2014). Chapter 4 details the objective findings of the data collection. Finally, Chapter 5 analyzes my findings in light of my research

questions, literature review, theoretical framework, and offers conclusions based upon my analysis and recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

This study analyzes how White middle class mothers experience high school choice in a small town that has been given the pseudonym Leonard City. A case study of high school choice in a small town is necessary because the majority of reviewed research takes place in large cities and is concerned with elementary school choice. The conversation surrounding school choice in America often revolves around social class and race. This chapter examines literature devoted to the complex and interwoven strands of race, social class, and school choice in order to understand these findings and relate them to the experience of mothers in Leonard City. The literature surrounding race, social class, and school choice is far-reaching and multi-layered. Thus, the literature reviewed in this chapter is meant to provide context for this study, which addresses these complex issues. While this literature review cannot encompass all areas of race, class, and American education reform, it seeks to follow the threads of scholarship that have examined the ways in which social class influences educational opportunities and therefore, school choice.

The literature review is broken into two distinct sections. The first part of the literature review examines the achievement gap and school reforms addressing it, the history of forced school desegregation, the resulting difficulties, and the adverse effects of present-day segregated schooling on students of color. The second part of the literature review looks closely at the ways that White middle class families choose schools in the current era of school choice. It is these recent findings that frame this particular study as White middle class families in Leonard City are currently in the



position to choose an area high school for their children. This study will carefully document the school choice experience of several Leonard mothers and then analyze the collected data to document how these mothers consider high schools within specific racial and class-based contexts. The literature review concludes by outlining the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, whose ideas regarding social class form the dissertation's framework (Fiel, 2015; Horvat, 2003; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; McDonough, Ventresca & Outcalt, 2000).

### **Addressing the Racial Achievement Gap**

The racial achievement gap, or the difference between the achievement of African American, Latino, and White students in schools has been of concern for many decades (Ladson-Billings, 2006a; Ravitch, 2013). Reformers have attempted to address this gap in many ways, including both the standards and school choice movements (Ravitch, 2013). While both of these movements have been problematic, they have also had considerable impact on school reforms and are relevant in order to fully understand the racial achievement gap.

**The standards movement.** The standards movement is a difficult movement to clearly define as its terminology often shifts depending on the acronym being associated with it (Hamilton, Stecher & Yuan, 2012). No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top, and Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are all programs that stem from the Standards Based Accountability (SBA) movement (Hamilton, Stecher & Yuan, 2012). While each of these programs has its own finer points, they have commonalities based in the SBA, which seeks to find ways to standardize student learning in part to predict similar outcomes for student performance and hold schools and teachers accountable if

students do not reach these outcomes (Hamilton, Stecher & Yuan, 2012). Supporters of the SBA movement believe that standardization is an important step in the goal of equalizing schooling experiences across the nation (Hamilton, Stecher & Yuan, 2012). Problems within the standards movement seem to arise around high stakes testing and range from improper use of testing, teaching to the test, and grade inflation (Hamilton, Stecher & Yuan, 2012). The question of autonomy and the de-professionalization of teachers in the classroom are also central components of the standards debate (Hamilton, Stecher & Yuan, 2012). In terms of the racial achievement gap, a problem voiced early in the standards movement was that students do not all start from the same point (Hamilton, Stecher & Yuan, 2012). While standards can act as an ideal for student achievement goals, most scholars know that implementing standards in schools in and of itself will not close the racial achievement gap (Merolla, 2014; Ravitch, 2013). The standards movement still has relevance within education reform and with reformers; its intention to have some standard by which to assess student achievement is logical (Hamilton, Stecher & Yuan, 2012). However, SBA needs to move away from an emphasis on high stakes testing and de-professionalization of teachers (Hamilton, Stecher & Yuan, 2012). The standards movement also needs to clearly articulate how to address the racial achievement gap.

**School choice reform.** The school choice movement of the 1990's also began as an attempt to close the achievement gap and arose as a reform alongside the standards movement (Hamilton, Stecher & Yuan, 2012; Ravitch, 2013). School choice reform was meant to provide disadvantaged families with a choice of schools through a variety of measures including vouchers, charter schools, and choice schools (Ravitch, 2013; Roda

& Wells, 2013). Having choice would, in theory, allow families to leave troublesome schools and enroll their children in more successful ones, thus providing more equity and access for less economically advantaged families (Ravitch, 2013; Reay, 2003; Roda & Wells, 2013). Yet, the research on school choice clearly shows advantaged families are usually able to make choices, leaving disadvantaged families in less appealing schools and deepening the racial achievement gap (Ravitch, 2013; Reay, 2003; Roda & Wells, 2013). The experience in Leonard City may be a microcosm of what many cities and schools are experiencing nationally. School choice has widened the options of the middle class, allowing families to move their children into different schools without the burden of a geographic move (Renzulli & Evans, 2005). Like the standards movement, one can argue that school choice is an appealing component of educational reform but neither have been successful in closing the achievement gap (Brantlinger, 2003; Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Lareau & Goyette, 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013). The research regarding both movements includes the problems these programs encounter in serving economically disadvantaged students, who are often students of color (Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Roda & Wells, 2013). Some of these problems include a lack of cultural understanding and appreciation of students of color in schools that support culturally dominant ideals (Goldenberg, 2014). Newer scholarship examines these prominent factors as crucial parts of understanding and addressing the achievement gap (Goldenberg, 2014; Horvat & O'Connor, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Merolla, 2014; Milner, 2010).

**The education debt.** An important addition to the achievement gap discourse has been broadening its definition. A more comprehensive definition helps to deepen the

national understanding of the gap's root causes by giving it a new language. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006a) reframed the term achievement gap to the, "education debt" (Ladson, Billings, 2006a, pg.5). Her work recounts all of the ways that Black and Brown children have been marginalized and excluded from our country's promises, and it is these numerous, accumulated debts that more thoroughly and honestly explain the achievement gaps (Ladson-Billings, 2006a, 2013). In order to close achievement gaps we must address the historical, economic, socio-political, and moral debts owed to students of color in this country (Ladson-Billings, 2006b, 2013). In fact, we can expect no other outcome except an achievement gap if we continue to incur debt rather than trying to pay it down (Ladson-Billings, 2006b, 2013). Reframing the achievement gap as a layered accumulation of debts means that future school reforms must address this debt in its entirety in order to be successful.

One way scholars suggest addressing the education debt and closing the achievement gap is through the sincere and sustained recognition and study of the lingering effects of institutional racism on students of color, particularly Black students (Horvat & O'Connor, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006a; Ladson-Billings, 2006b; Merolla, 2014; Milner, 2010). One such lingering effect is the inability of schools to build upon the cultural capital of the Black community (Goldenberg, 2014). Cultural capital, a term coined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977), whose work frames this study, has a complexity of meaning, but for this purpose can be seen as the tangible markers of culture and tastes such as dress, language style, and music (Goldenberg, 2014). Schools, which subscribe to dominant White ideals, often run into conflict when negotiating relationships with Black families and students (Goldenberg, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2013;

Milner, 2010/2015). It is important then to examine the relationship between Black culture and schools in order to consider ways of improving relationships and shrinking the achievement gap.

**Black<sup>3</sup> culture in schools.** The cultural strengths of Black and Latino children are not easily recognized by the dominant culture and its institutions such as schools (Goldenberg, 2014). Schools are most often run by White women unaware of their own cultural dominance (The State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006). This cultural mismatch can cause friction between students and teachers, as well as subject students of color to more routine disciplinary action (Goldenberg, 2014, Milner, 2010). To combat this friction, White educators should be taught to recognize their own cultural markers, the things that distinguish their culture, as well as those of their students of color, with the goal of seeing each other more fully (Goldenberg, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2013; Milner, 2015). A broader perspective of culture and cultural interaction would help foster positive relationships between teachers, students, families, and schools (Goldenberg, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2013; Milner, 2015). Implementing this type of educator training could help us inch towards paying down the education debt and closing the achievement gap by changing the ways that White institutions have historically interacted with persons of color.

**Oppositional culture theory and the theory of Black habitus.** One pervasive, negative viewpoint regarding Black culture that has shaped educators' perspectives towards students of color has been Oppositional Culture Theory (OCT) (Goldenberg, 2015; Merolla, 2014). This theory, developed in 1979 by John Ogbu, and

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<sup>3</sup> Referring to John Ogbu's definition of Black; Ogbu's use of Black refers to Black Americans whose ancestors were brought to American as slaves (D'Agostini, 2013; Ogbu, 1974)

redeveloped in many iterations, sought to explain the achievement gap as a rejection of schooling by Black students as a way to protest dominant White society (Goldenberg, 2015; Merolla, 2014; Ogbu, 1979). While scholars have used Ogbu's theory to help understand the achievement gap, it has deficiencies (Merolla, 2014). OCT is troublesome because it points to the attitudes of Black students towards school and learning as the cause for poor performances in school (Merolla, 2014). Like the standards movement, OCT places blame on the individual and exonerates historically inequitable organizations and institutions. The persistence of OCT as an implicit national belief about students and families of color should be made explicit to educators in order to combat possible negative interactions and correct previous assumptions about Black culture. More recent ideas, like the Theory of Black Habitus could be introduced to educators.

Merolla's (2014) Theory of Black Habitus rejects OCT as simply not correct. Bourdieu, whose work frames this study, spends considerable time explaining habitus and yet it remains an elusive terms (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Habitus can be best understood as an individual's subconscious understanding of their own social class, which is continually affirmed by the ways larger society understands and treats them (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Merolla theorized that the Black community embraces the cultural norm of upward mobility through schooling while recognizing the very real racial obstacles in their way (Merolla, 2014). Merolla's research reports no evidence to support the idea that Black families teach their children to reject schooling, as supposed by OCT (Merolla, 2014). In fact, the evidence points to the opposite; Black families teach their children that school is necessary to achieve power in American society (Merolla, 2014; Milner, 2015). However, Black families also acknowledge institutional racism and daily

persecutions that Black students face in school (Merolla, 2014; Milner, 2015). Merolla (2014) asks educators and educational policy makers to find ways to work with Black Habitus, to engage students, and overcome achievement obstacles. Merolla (2014) also recommends research studying Black students' experiences in school. Merolla's work corresponds with Gloria Ladson-Billings' (2006, 2013) and Goldenberg's (2014) findings, which stressed the importance of acknowledging the structural discrimination that students of color, particularly Black students, face in school.

While acknowledging structural discrimination and cultural discrimination are important steps in paying down the education debt and understanding the causes of the achievement gap, it is just as important to recognize the key role federal education policy plays in equalizing educational opportunities for students of color (Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014). Currently, federal policy consists of school choice and standards-based accountability as ways to achieve equality for all students in all schools (Hamilton, Stecher & Yuan, 2012; Ravitch, 2013; Roda & Wells, 2013). During the *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) decision and throughout the Civil Rights Era, the educational policy of federal government was to desegregate schools in order to promote equal opportunities for students of color (Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014). These efforts were acrimonious and exhausting, but also successful in integrating schools that were previously all White (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Successes gained during this time period have been largely reversed due to a variety of factors including the changing agenda of the federal government, key court decisions, and the will of the people who are at grass roots level making decisions about where to send their children to school (Chemerinski, 2003; Orfield, 1978; Orfield, 1996; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera,

2014). The following sections of the literature review examine these time periods in order to explore the extent to which instituting legal measures of integration were successful and the fortitude involved in federally regulating school diversity.

### **Historical Overview of School Desegregation**

The national debate of how to approach school segregation has lingered from the nineteenth century well into the twenty- first century. Prior to *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), the law under *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) ruling said that separate was in fact equal (Orfield 1996; Chemerinski, 2003; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014). The Supreme Court intended a conclusive end to legal school segregation with the *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) decision, which stated that separate was never equal. Still, the many- layered results of this finding continue to resonate with us over sixty years later (Kozol 2005; Orfield, Frankenberg, Eu & Kuscera, 2014; Reardon et al, 2014). With the legal ruling that separate was never equal, schools were charged with the task of integration. But how could one go about integrating schools that were expressly designed to keep Blacks and Whites separate? Due to explicit laws separating the races, school desegregation in the South was somewhat clearer than it was in the North, which suffered from a more ambiguous, de facto segregation (Chemerinski, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996).

**Southern desegregation.** School integration in the South was not simple, welcomed, nor presently sustained. Yet, the South's overt Jim Crow laws did make integrating schools initially more straightforward than in the North (Chemerinsky, 2003; Orfield, Frankenberg, Eu & Kuscera, 2014). In order to comply with the *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), finding, the South had to do away with separate school



facilities (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Still, the South moved very slowly towards actual integration, with multiple factions including politicians, families, local school administrations, and school boards doing everything in their power to obstruct it (Chemerinsky, 2003). Some Southern school boards tried to close public schools, and others even started primitive “choice programs”, which allowed students to choose the school they would attend and thus enabled continued segregation (Chemerinsky, 2006, p.1602). Civil rights advocates, the federal government, and the courts remained involved in the battle for school desegregation, and a decade after *Brown*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, became key in forcing the South’s hand (Chemerinsky, 2003). The Civil Rights Act promised to cut off funds to schools that did not have integration plans in place (Chemerinsky, 2003; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014). Finally, the threat of legal action, economic sanctions, and sustained political pressure meant that a decade after *Brown v. Board* (1954), Southern schools finally began the work of integrating schools by integrating the previously separate facilities (Chemerinsky, 2003; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014).

Alongside President Johnson’s Civil Rights Act, the Supreme Court Case, *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenberg Board of Education* (1971) was seminal in the integration of Southern schools (Siegal-Hawley, 2014; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014). *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenberg* (1971), allowed transportation of students to any schools within a district in order to racially diversify. This came to be known as busing (Siegal-Hawley, 2014; Orfield, Frankenberg, Eu & Kuscera, 2014). Busing was, and has remained, the most effective and least expensive way to integrate schools, even though its presence was controversial (Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Siegal-Hawley, 2014). Districts in

the South had far reaching boundaries, which allowed for the practice of busing in order to enable more authentic school integration (Chemerinsky, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014). Busing allowed for steady desegregation patterns to hold in the South well until the 1990's (Chemerinsky, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014).

**Northern desegregation.** In contrast to Southern desegregation efforts stemming from 1964-1990's, the Northern efforts were more varied in approach, generally more difficult to establish, and proved less sustainable than the South (Chemerinsky, 2003; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014).

The metropolitan areas of the North would prove difficult to authentically integrate as Northern segregation was more ambiguous than in the South (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). The lack of explicit Jim Crow Laws separating facilities, coupled with White flight, and Court rulings in the 1970's against civil rights plaintiffs meant that Northern desegregation efforts were less successful (Chemerinski, 2003). Mid-century White flight to the suburbs, in part to avoid school integration, meant that by the 1970's most Northern Blacks and Whites lived apart (Chemerinsky, 2003; Siegal & Hawley, 2014). Whites lived in suburbs that surrounded cities made up primarily of Blacks and Latinos (Chemerinsky, 2003). By 1980, Whites accounted for less than one third of the school make-up of the cities of Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, Detroit, and Chicago (Chemerinski, 2003). Whites had simply moved out of these cities, in part to avoid integrating (Chemerinski, 2003). Busing, which proved effective in the South, was less so in the North due to neighborhood sprawl (Chemerinsky, 2003). There were not enough White students left in cities or Black and minority students in the suburbs to integrate

schools proportionately (Chemerinski, 2003). *Swann v. Mecklenburg* (1971), which allowed intra -district busing, did not allow for inter-district busing (Chemerinski, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Siegal & Howley, 2014). However, it became clear in the 1970's that in order to have effective school desegregation, the nation would need interdistrict busing allowances (Chemerinski, 2003).

The school district of Detroit sought to address busing through inter -suburban and urban district busing plans (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). However, intense protest against this idea, including President Nixon's, led the Supreme Court to reject Detroit's desegregation plan (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). In, *Milliken v. Bradley I* (1974), the Supreme Court ruled that lower courts could not order desegregation unless is it could be shown that districts had intentional segregated practices (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). This decision meant that courts could only force a district to desegregate if intentional segregation by said district, or by the state that district resided in, was proven in court (Chemerinsky, 2003; Orfield, Frankenberg, Eu & Kuscera, 2014). It was very difficult for many plaintiffs in Northern areas to prove intentional district segregated practices due to the lack of explicit Jim Crow Laws (Chemerinski, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996). The Supreme Court also made a decisive ruling about de jure segregation and de facto segregation in the case of, *Keyes v School District 1, Denver, CO* (1973), which placed the burden of proof of discriminatory intention on the plaintiff (Chemerinski, 2003). Again, it was very difficult for plaintiffs to prove intentional discriminatory practices by school districts in the North where segregation was mainly due to neighborhood choices. As segregated housing practices were legal and intentional in the North, it has proved

difficult for plaintiffs to win claims against the resulting segregated school districts (Chemerinski, 2003).

The effects of *Millikin v. Bradley* (1974) and *Keyes v. School District 1, Denver, CO* (1973) decisions have been devastating up through 2017, as their findings are mainly responsible for our segregated practices today (Chemerinski, 2003). City schools in the Northeast and other major metropolitan areas are populated by a majority of students of color, while suburban schools remain mostly White (Chemerinski, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996). The case of *San Antonio School District v Rodriguez* (1973) cemented the practice of residents' property taxes going to their local schools, thus deciding that schools in poor neighborhoods would remain perennially underfunded (Chemerinski, 2003). As a result, these minority urban schools remain severely underfunded in relation to their wealthier, White suburban counterparts (Chemerinski, 2003).

**The end of legally-enforced integration.** Three major court cases in the 1990's would ultimately put an end to the legal enforcement and oversight of school-district integration: *Board of Education of Oklahoma v. Dowell* (1991), *Freeman v. Pitts*, (1992), and *Missouri v. Jenkins*, (1995). These decisions, which each sought to put school authority back into the hands of local neighborhoods, coupled with the lack of federal economic and political oversight, have resulted in schools reversing any initial success in desegregation (Chemerinski, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014). Since the decisions of the 1990's, all of the substantial gains made from intentional desegregation have been reversed, and the majority of African American and Latino students attend majority minority schools. (Chemerinsky, 2003; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014). Civil rights advocates in this time period turned their

attention away from the goal of authentic integration towards advocacy efforts for students of color left in difficult and isolating school environments (Chemerinski, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996). This switch from federal oversight to local control of schools pertaining to integration has dominated the field of education through today and ultimately has led to the implementation of school choice policy as a tool for diversification of schools.

### **Current School Demographics**

National segregation trends reveal the effects of *The Board of Education of Oklahoma City v Dowell (1991)*. Currently, in schools across the nation, Whites primarily go to school with Whites and Blacks with Blacks (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Orfield, Frankenberg, Eu & Kuscera, 2014). New immigrant populations of Latinos and Asians have changed the national demographics of the country and schools (Orfield, Frankenberg, Eu & Kuscera, 2014). Latinos remain heavily segregated from Whites, even more so than Blacks, while Asians are the least segregated from Whites (Orfield, Frankenberg, Eu & Kuscera, 2014). Living in a large city versus living in a smaller city or suburb also affects the exposure that White students and students of color have to each other in school. The larger the city, the less exposure students of color and White students have to each other (Orfield, Frankenberg, Eu & Kuscera, 2014). This is important to note when considering that nationally, we have seen the most population growth in our cities in the past decade (Siegal-Hawley, 2014). Also of note is the connection between concentrated areas of poverty and city living. Students of color living in large metropolitan areas often are in schools in which the majority live at or below the poverty line (Orfield, Frankenberg, Eu & Kuscera, 2014). This stark reality means that Black and

Latino students in large cities have little exposure to either Whites or Asians, as well as little exposure to individuals from the middle class (Orfield, Frankenberg, Eu & Kuscera, 2014).

It is abundantly evident that today's schools are not racially integrated and the results of segregation for students of color have been adverse. Students of color do not have access to top tier educational facilities, experiences, or social networks that ensure a solid middle class future (Kahlenberg, 2001; Kozol, 1991, 2005; Massey & Denton, 1993; Rothstein, 2013, 2015). Federal education policy does not have explicit diversity measures, ensuring that students of color have less access to future middle class status (Brantlinger, 2003; Horvat, 2003). Rather, schools and communities are left to their own devices, ensuring continued self-segregation of the upper classes, which allows for replication of social class (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Lareau & Goyette, 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013). Bourdieu, whose theories frame this study, explains this phenomenon is due to the entrenchment of cultural institutions and structures in the dominant tradition (Horvat, 2003). This entrenchment is so embedded that individuals are often unaware of the benefits they reap from the system and instead view it as the way things happen to be; everyone just happens to look out only for one's own children (Apple, 2001; Fiel, 2015; Horvat, 2003). However, modern school segregation did not just happen. Neighborhood choices and school zoning within neighborhoods play substantial roles in where children go to school and the kind of school children attend (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Kozol, 2005; Spencer, 2015).

**Apartheid schooling.** Schools are zoned by community, and our communities remain segregated, which means that an estimated 15% of our nation's African American

students are educated in what have come to be termed, apartheid schools (Spencer, 2015). Apartheid schools contain over 99% of students who identify as Black (Spencer, 2015). Noted sociologist Jonathan Kozol writes extensively about, not only the physical disrepair of apartheid schools, but of the psychological damage done to children attending such schools (Kozol, 1991; 2005). The isolation of an apartheid school separates low SES students of color from their middle class peers and from the benefits of middle class schools (Kahlenberg, 2001; Kozol, 2005) When low SES students of color attend middle class schools, the chances of attending college and breaking the cycle of poverty improve tremendously (Kahlenberg, 2001). Conversely, attending an apartheid school reduces the chances of graduating from college (Kozol, 2005). Apartheid schools isolate our nation's poor Black and Latino students from the crucial middle class pathways needed for social networking and mobility (Kozol, 1991, Lareau & Horvat, 1999, Rothstein, 2015). The social networking opportunities that are closed off through economic and/or racial segregation are predictive of far- reaching consequences ranging from future professional achievements to increased crime rates (Billings, Deming & Rockoff, 2014; Kahlenberg, 2001; Lareau, 2011). These unreachable social networks are crucial links to social mobility.

Often, apartheid schools use rhetoric to motivate students. Such rhetoric conveys to students in these dismal schools that their success is based upon how hard they work (Brantlinger, 2003; Kozol, 2005). This rhetoric places responsibility for one's station in life squarely on the individual, thus failure at school is perceived as due to one's personal work ethic (Brantlinger, 2003; Kozol, 2005). It puts the individual in control of their destiny and ignores the cultural structures in place that heavily influence individual

outcomes (Bourdieu, 1985) The simplicity of the rhetoric fails to acknowledge the layers of privilege and the crucial web of social networks that are needed for future success (Brantlinger, 2003; Kozol, 2005; Lareau, 2011; Merolla, 2014). Like John Ogbu's (1979) Oppositional Culture Theory (OCT), rhetoric meant to motivate and engage students of color discounts the long history and current state of institutional racism that students of color face in schools (Chemerinski, 2003; Merolla, 2014; Orfield, Frankenberg, Eu and Kuscera, 2014). Simply telling students they only need to work hard to achieve does not recognize the economic limits and lack of access that these students and their families face. Apartheid schools are a living example of the current state of structural racism and are perhaps the most explicit example of how Black and Latino communities are cut off from powerful social networks. Community self-segregation has contributed to the existence of apartheid schools and school choice has not ameliorated the isolation for these students. The next section of the literature review examines in greater detail the role of school choice and its relationship to self-segregation. It also looks specifically at the White middle class experience with school choice and provides evidence for why we need explicit local or federal policy devoted to diversifying choice schools.

**School choice and modern segregation.** Despite the research-based and anecdotal evidence that shows apartheid schools are devastating to Black and Latino students (Kozol, 1991/2005), our nation's communities continue to send their children to racially segregated schools (Chemerinsky, 2013; Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Orfield, Frankenberg, Eu & Kuscera, 2014). The Supreme Court's abolition of forced integration means that neighborhoods again dictate where students attend school, and the current persistence of racially segregated neighborhoods means that schools remain racially



segregated (Chemerinski, 2013; Orfield et al, 2014; Reardon et al, 2012). School choice, as previously described, was introduced as a reform to help inspire organic integration; in particular it was meant to provide school options for disadvantaged families outside of their districts (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Roda & Wells, 2013). While school choice reform may have been well intended, the results have not met the original objective. Current school choice policies are mostly intentionally “color-blind” and these policies have allowed levels of segregation to rise and persist (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Wells, 2014, pg. 38). It is uncommon to find people who integrate because they believe it is the right thing to do (Reay, 2008; Roda & Wells, 2013; Wells, 2014). When they are looking to integrate, it is often within strict parameters (Reay et al., 2007; Roda & Wells, 2013). More stories detail communities that fight to stay separate than communities fighting to integrate (Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Reardon et al, 2012; Renzulli and Evans, 2005).

The results of school choice programming also reveal a commentary on social class reproduction; school choice is far more readily available to higher social classes (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Reay & Lucey, 2003; Reinoso, 2008; Wells, 2014). Furthermore, the schools that one chooses allows for generational social reproduction (Nash,1990). The concept of school choice was meant to allow parents to choose schools for their children in a replica of a national market-based economy (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Roda & Wells, 2013). Yet, just like our market-based economy, within the school choice system, the law of supply and demand has arisen (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Roda & Wells, 2013). There are simply more people vying for access to the middle class through top choice schools than there are spots for those applicants (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Fiel, 2015). The intricate admission

processes that often accompany school choice means that social groups can and do use the competitive field of education to begin to exclude one another in order to maintain their own social status (Fiel, 2015; Roda & Wells, 2013). Although evidence reveals some parents feel conflicted about this advantage, nevertheless they feel constrained by the choices and compelled to access the best one for their children (Fiel, 2015; Roda & Wells, 2013). Research on national school choice policy has made it abundantly clear that schools have not integrated based upon the current framework (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Orfield et. al., 2014). Rather, school choice has become riddled with back channels that White middle class families employ to further their aspirations and secure middle class futures for their children (Roda & Wells, 2013). The means that families use to navigate the school choice process depends greatly on their social class and the ways they are able to utilize what Bourdieu termed, practice (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Lareau, 2011; Reay and Ball, 1998; Reay and Lucey, 2003). A review of the research exploring these mechanisms including an examination of Bourdieu's theoretical framework provides a deeper perspective on the entanglement of social class and school choice.

**Social class and school interactions.** School choice arguably belongs specifically to middle and upper class families, as they are the ones often able to make decisive school choices for their children (Reay, 2008). If middle class status was based solely in terms of income, half of Americans would fall within its range (Pew, 2015). However, ideas about what middle class status means has changed over the last generation and one can now argue that income has less to do with class status today than other class markers (Renwick & Short, 2014; Williams, 2014). One present marker used to determine middle

class status used today is education level; middle class status usually means a college education (Renwick & Short, 2014; Williams, 2014).

Middle class parents, usually mothers, often believe it is their role to mold their children towards a professional future. To do so means training children from a young age and exposing them to a broad range of cultural experiences so that they are cultured and ready to take their places in the professional world (Lareau, 2011; Kimelberg, 2014). This can differ from working class or poor families, whose members often view the school officials as the professionals and wait to be contacted as necessary (Lareau, 2011). Middle class families view themselves as rightful decision makers and advocates for their children in their schools. This is in direct contrast to the working class or poor familial view, which would not presume to take on a role that is seen as the job of the teacher and school (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Lareau, 2011; Kimelberg, 2014). Each parenting style typically produces a certain type of child (Lareau, 2011). Middle class children are raised to ask questions, question authority, and expect respect. This development will suit their expected professional roles (Lareau, 2011). Working class and poor children are raised to wait for answers and respect authority, which will suit their roles as future laborers (Lareau, 2011; Willis, 1981). While the working class and poor children will often resist authority in subversive ways, they do not often overtly question the professionals, in this case the school (Lareau, 2011; Willis, 1981).

Working and lower class families do not often have access to premier choice schools and rather choose the best school within a variety of boundaries and ideologies (Bourdieu & Passaron, 1992; Reay & Lucey, 2003). Amplifying the differing experiences of school choice amongst the social classes are different notions of how parents should

interact with schools (Lareau, 2011; Reay & Ball, 1998). In general, low and working class parents are less involved in the school community, and thus their children have more control over the direction of their education (Lareau, 2011). Low income and working class families in Britain usually allow their children to choose their secondary or high school (Reay & Ball, 1998). This parental approach directly contradicts the educational institution notion that good parenting means remaining involved in one's children's education (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 2011). Further compounding this cultural and institutional conflict are numerous barriers that exist in the school choice process for low and working class families (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003, Lareau, 2011). Arranging school applications and school visits requires an economic flexibility not readily available to low and working class families (Roda & Wells, 2013). Immigrants experience further boundaries due to differing cultural norms and language constraints. These constraints often foist children into a parental role within the English- speaking school, with the power of decision- making that accompanies adulthood (Roda & Wells, 2013). Children of immigrants often find themselves in the position of knowing more than their parents about the culture of school and are therefore entrusted to make educational decisions for themselves.

In contrast, middle class families often give their children the appearance of choice, but essentially almost always guide their children's choices towards the schools that the parents deem most appropriate (Reay & Ball, 1998; Reinoso, 2008). Middle class families use their social capital, or the access gained through their social networks to place their children in the best schools possible (Nash, 1990; Reinoso, 2008), and it is the middle class mothers in particular whom usually directs the children's education

(Brantlinger, 2003; Kimelberg, 2012; Reay & Ball 1998). Parents utilize their social networks to access the coveted, informal information regarding schools and it this informal information that influences families the most (Kimelberg, 2012; Reay & Ball, 1998; Reinoso, 2008; Roda & Wells, 2013). Parents want to send their children to schools with similarly classed families and are actively involved in shaping their children's educational choices throughout their education (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Reinoso, 2008). The differing expectations of the social classes about involvement in their children's education affects both the ways that schools interact with families and the way that families interact with and choose schools.

### **The White Middle Class and Urban Schooling**

Theories of choice have been applied to research on how people make decisions that arise out of the choice to reside in urban neighborhoods. Albert Hirschman (1970) made the distinction between one's choice of response when involved in an organization deemed failing. One can either exit the circumstance or stay put. If one chooses to stay, then one often does so with the intention of fixing the situation. In order to fix the situation, one becomes compelled to use one's voice. If a person exits a failing predicament, it often indicates the complete loss of hope in the organization (Hirschman, 1970). In terms of White middle class school choice, Billingham and Kimelberg (2013) have applied Hirschman's (1970) Exit vs. Voice theory to make sense of urban gentrification, and the resulting rise of the White middle class decision to stay in urban areas. In past decades, the middle class have often exited the system for suburban lifestyles (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009). However, this has changed in the past two decades (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013). White middle class

people are now more often raising their families in cities, and this change in demographics means that Whites must consider the school options for their children in the city (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013). Some middle class families essentially exit the public school system through private or highly selective magnet/choice schools, but many remain in the general population due to political beliefs, financial constraints, or an inability to gain entrance to top city schools (Renzulli & Evans, 2005, Roda & Wells, 2013, Posey-Maddox et al, 2014). Those middle class White families who have decided to stay in an urban area and use their voices in order to fix the situations they are in have radically changed the demographics of many of the schools in their gentrified neighborhoods (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Hannah-Jones, 2015).

The rise of middle class city dwellers, and their accompanying voices, have resulted in changes in city school systems for better and for worse (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Posey-Maddox et al, 2014). The middle class is important for the political and economic influences they bring to school districts (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009). Urban areas often use marketing teams to entice WMC families to stay in cities, thus keeping the political and economic clout in those urban areas (Posey-Maddox et al, 2014; West, 1992). Yet, participation in the public schools can be problematic too (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009). While the WMC often are able to have institutions respond to their needs, and can use their resources to improve school standards, they often do so for the betterment or advancement of their individual children and not the school as a whole (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009). This may take the form of specialized academic programs aimed at enriching the high performing students of the WMC (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009). This individualistic approach can serve to heighten the inequalities within a school

or even change the demographics of the chosen school to WMC and away from the low SES students of color the school originally served (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009, Hannah-Jones, 2015). Conversely, there are school communities who use their considerable clout to make positive changes for the entire school community (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009). More research is needed on these schools, and educational policy makers should review and adopt the ways in which parents and families work with the school to initiate whole school reforms (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Hannah-Jones, 2015; Kahlenberg, 2001).

**Choosing the “good” schools.** Once a White middle class family has decided to stay in an urban or urban characteristic area and send their children to public school, they must navigate the process of finding the right school for their children. This journey is often fraught with anxiety and tension (Milner, 2010; Roda & Wells, 2013). White middle class parents depend on a variety of resources to help them choose the best schools for their children. These resources may include guidance from preschool teachers, workshops aimed at school choice, or guidance from preschools themselves (Roda & Wells, 2013). However, nothing is more powerful or important to middle class school choice than the social network of WMC parents (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2013). The far -reaching power of these networks in the school choice process starkly contrasts the social networks available to most Black or Latino students in apartheid schools (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003). These networks help WMC parents determine the good schools, or the schools that others in their network have selected.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the informal networks of parent conversations and playground chatter in determining which schools the middle class choose for their children (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003). Social circles of mainly

White, middle class women exchange information and together they co-construct and often uphold the social stratification of schools (Brantlinger, 2003; Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003). In fact, more than the previously mentioned marketing campaigns directed at the White, middle class or any school outreach programming (West, 1992), it is the social network of the families that provide the bulk of reliable information to parents regarding schools (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Reinoso, 2008). Often parents will not even visit a school, but will rely on the advice of trusted friends or resources to inform their school decision- making (Reay et al, 2008; Reinoso, 2008). The sharing of information by White middle class parents has led to a glut of White middle class families choosing to attend particular schools within a given district, while avoiding other schools based solely on poor reputations (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Roda & Wells, 2013). This flocking to certain schools while avoiding others has caused problems for schools and communities as discussed later in this review.

**Just the right amount of diversity, please.** While many White middle class city dwellers are theoretically in support of diverse schooling, there is a certain amount of diversity that is comfortable to White middle class parents (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Roda & Wells, 2013). While individual White middle class families may have different thresholds of acceptable ratios of Black or Latino students to White students, it is crucial that there remain an acceptable number of White middle class families in a school in order to attract other such families to go to a historically, majority Black or Latino school (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012). In general, Whites are less willing to move into more diverse neighborhoods, or schools, than non-Whites (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012). And, Whites are more likely



to take their children out of public schools as the number of Black children in those schools increases (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Lareau & Goyette, 2015). Within school choice programs, White parents most often choose the school with the highest White enrollment or with a highly selective academic program (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Riel, Parcel, Roslyn, Mickelson, Stephen, Smith, 2018; Reay et al, 2008). White parents in Kimelberg and Bilingham's (2012) Boston study espoused the desire for diversity, but it was limited; Whites did not want to be a minority in the city schools where they were the clear minority (Argyris & Schon, 1974). Instead, White parents put their children in schools that did not reflect the actual demographics of Boston, meaning the schools were mainly White. This pattern means that even within heavily populated Black or Latino areas, school choice programs do not reflect the area's demographics nor do the schools chosen by White families (Kimelberg & Bilingham, 2012; Matthews, 2012; Roda & Wells, 2013). We see this replicated in American city after city (Kimelberg & Bilingham, 2012; Matthews, 2012; Roda & Wells, 2013).

Parents are more willing to try an emerging school if a critical mass of like-minded parents are in tow (Kimelberg & Bilingham, 2013). This means that WMC families need the visible commitment of other WMC families in order to try a particular school that is considered up- and- coming (Kimelberg & Bilingham, 2013). Having a critical mass of similarly minded parents allows families to try out the public school system while keeping in mind they can always leave if it does not work out (Kimelberg & Bilingham, 2013; Roda & Wells, 2013). This point nicely juxtaposes Reay's (2008) description of the lower class's choice less school choice, which posits that the working and lower classes do not have the authentic choices of the White middle class. The White

middle class can exit a system if they deem it unfixable while the poor do not have the same economic flexibility (Hirschman, 1970).

Many argue that increasing school choice will only allow the White middle class more and easier options to escape undesirable schools that are often heavily populated with Black and Latino students (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2013). It is less clear whether leaving such schools is based solely upon race, or other common problems that accompany low income schools and highly segregated schools, and more research is needed in this area (Kimelberg & Hunt, 2016; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2013; Lareau & Goyette, 2015). These problems include low student achievement on standardized tests, low teacher aptitude, and higher levels of violence in such schools (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Lareau & Goyette, 2015). Despite increased integration within districts, individual schools within integrated districts remain heavily segregated (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012). This reality reveals the power of parental choices over district- drawn school boundaries (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012). White middle class families can avoid a neighborhood school, or try it out en masse. If a critical mass of WMC parents sustain involvement in a previously marginalized school, they can change the demographics and reputation of the school within the White middle class social networks. This change happens through the involvement of the WMC in their children's school, an extension of the WMC social class belief system parents should remain involved in their children's education (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 2011; Reay, 2005).

**Middle class involvement within schools.** When White middle class families choose schools, they tend to be highly involved in shaping their children's education and thus remain involved in their schools far more than the poorer or working class parents

(Lareau, 2011; Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003). Middle class families can be a positive force for struggling urban districts. They can raise funds and use political and financial clout to have programming, hiring, and curriculum examined (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Roda & Wells, 2013). Parents can focus on the collective good of the school, but all too often, middle class parents tend to focus on the individual needs of their own children (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Roda & Wells, 2013). When parents do not focus on the improvement of the school as a whole, we often see lower and working class students become more vulnerable (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009). This may mean less funding for programming that benefits working class or poor families (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009). A serious peril of WMC parental involvement can be the bolstering of a neighborhood school so much that it becomes an overly populated, prized choice school, thus forcing working class or poor children to the edge of, and ultimately out of, the school (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Hanah-Jones, 2016). Black, Latino, or low SES families caught in these changes can feel sidelined or dismissed, as if their previous contributions to the school were unseen (Roda & Wells, 2013). Oftentimes a school that is in the midst of changing demographics can see White middle class families assume leadership roles that have been historically Black or Latino (Hanah-Jones, 2016; Roda & Wells, 2013). The message to our Black and Latino students and families is that the school may not see the value in their previous contributions (Roda & Wells, 2013). Schools in a demographic transition need leadership that is aware and active in addressing these perils so that all members of the school community can feel valued.

White middle class families can be a source of great help to a school with both finances and time (Cucchiara, 2009). However, as children get older, parent involvement

in daily school activities traditionally declines as White middle class families become more focused on high academic achievement in high school and its resulting college options (Reay et al, 2007). The experience of school choice changes in the high school years and research that examines this experience is pertinent to this study and is worth a review.

**School choice in the secondary years.** Priorities shift for White middle class parents as they make school choice decisions for high school. In younger years, families might choose a more diverse school knowing they will leave if it does not work out (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2013). High school is an important and less flexible choice for such families. (Reay et al., 2007). Studies in Europe and America have shown that parents who do choose mixed high schools for their White middle class children have many reasons for doing so, and these reasons are often self -beneficial (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2013; Reay et al., 2007). Several rationales have emerged in the literature when considering why White middle class families might choose a diverse high school for their children, including feeling morally obligated to do right by their children in a society that is skewed and unfair (Hannah-Jones, 2016; Reay et al., 2007). Still, choosing a diverse high school for one's White middle class child must be done thoughtfully so that ultimately one's child reaps benefits from this unusual selection.

One rationale for why White middle class families might choose a diverse high school is exposure to diversity itself. Many White middle class urban dwellers believe that the skill of navigating diversity is a soft skill, which is important training for future professional pursuits (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2013; Reay et al., 2007). Families who do choose diverse schools often cite the fluidity that their children will need to move into

diverse, multicultural professional fields (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2013; Reay et al., 2007). Choosing a multicultural school is often a White middle class response to strengthening advantages and outcomes rather than a simple desire to have diverse acquaintances for one's child (Fiel, 2015; Horvat, 2013; Reay et al., 2007). Introducing diversity to one's child can be viewed as building social capital (Hovat, 2013; Reay et al., 2007). Reay's study (2007) discusses the finding that often parents seek select forms of diversity for their children. In his European study, parents admitted to preferring their children befriend recent immigrant populations over, "white working class trash", or "black thugs" (Reay et al., 2007, p.1049; Reay, 2014). The two dismissed groups are associated with bad qualities like laziness, while the recent immigrants are viewed as industrious and thus the correct kind of diversity for their children to seek out and learn from (Reay et al., 2007; Reay, 2014).

Another explanation that emerged when White middle class families discussed the benefits of choosing a diverse high school was the ability to position their children at the top of the academic standings in the class (Reay et al., 2007). An economically advantaged student has a competitive edge over an economically disadvantaged student (Fiel, 2015; Reay et al., 2007). This edge includes improved self-esteem for the student as they rise to the top of their class, and allows students to distinguish themselves in the competitive education marketplace (Fiel, 2015; Reay et al., 2007). Thus, diversity has become something for White middle class families to consume, or to use for their own advantages (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2013; Reay et al, 2007). It is not something that builds connection amongst ethnic groups, but rather a way to remain separate and advantaged (Reay et al, 2007). Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework, which frames

this study, helps the reader to understand that this commodification of school choice is not something that just happened but rather is an end result of a class and race based society (Horvat, 2003).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Pierre Bourdieu was a French sociologist whose work has heavily influenced the development of sociology of American education (Susen & Turner, 2011). His theories provide a lens for this study. While rich in content and worthy of study, Bourdieu's theories are sometimes difficult to pin down due to their breadth (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). I reviewed research concerning Bourdieu's more well-known ideas including: habitus, cultural capital, field, practice, symbolic violence, symbolic power, and exclusion (Bourdieu, 1975/1985/1986/1996; Bourdieu & Passaron, 1992; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1990; Horvat, 2003; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Susen & Turner, 2011). I then reviewed research that applied these theories to the field of education, particularly the field of school choice (Brantlinger, 2003; Crozier et al, 2008; Demerath, 2010; Fiel, 2015; Horvat, 2003; James et al, 2010; McDonough et al, 2000; Nash, 1990; Reay, 2000, 2005).

**Habitus, cultural capital, field, and practice.** Habitus, cultural capital, field, and practice are essential Bourdieuan terms that give form to the social interactions we all experiences (Bourdieu, 1975/1989/1996; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Horvat, 2003; Thatcher et al, 2016). Bourdieu argued that in order to understand social dynamics one must understand that structures of a culture (in this case, race and class), are always present in the actions of the individual (Bourdieu & Passaron, 1990; Horvat, 2003). To understand what this meant I turned towards research that elaborated on these ideas.

The definition of habitus can adequately be explained as an individual's distinct point of view based upon what was absorbed from their specific social community during their formative years (Horvat, 2003; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Merolla, 2014). While habitus belongs to the individual, it was imparted by the society in which that individual is a part (Bourdieu & Passaron, 1990). Habitus is a person's sense of belief about themselves and their capabilities, and the resulting ease that they may feel in specific situations, be it a bodega or delicatessen (Horvat, 2003; Merolla, 2014; Reay, 2016). However, while habitus belongs to the individual, it also is shared by the group of which the individual is part (Bourdieu & Passaron, 1990; McDonough, et al., 2000). For example, an individual in a high SES group would expect to attend a good choice school, but that same group would generally agree upon what those good schools were (McDonough et. al, 2000). While habitus is often written about as something that is fixed, recent scholarship questions the idea of habitus as transposable (McGrath, 2007). It is argued that if one understand one's own habitus, one can act according to one's will rather than subconsciously and this could result in a changed habitus (McGrath, 2007). Another approach to habitus that is explored in the research is the cleft habitus, or the idea that one is born with one habitus but lives in a world that expects a different habitus (Thatcher, Ingrams, Burke & Abrahams, 2016). This experience often causes great difficulties within a person since they struggle to connect where they came from to where they ended up (Thatcher et al., 2016). Bourdieu wrote extensively of his own cleft habitus and resulting suffering; he was born into the lower class but rose to become an academic elite (Friedman, 2016). While Bourdieu acknowledged his own cleft habitus, he still believed that most people had the same habitus for a lifetime (Friedman, 2016). This

discrepancy reveals the literature's difficulty in pinning down the definitive parameters of habitus.

Bourdieu's ideas concerning cultural capital, much like habitus, have been viewed differently in the research (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). This study understands cultural capital as signals one presents to the world that help others understand their social class (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). These signals include the explicit, such as neighborhood, address, or skin color, as well as the more subtle tastes and predilections of a social class, such as music and pastimes (Horvat, 2003; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Cultural capital is often viewed as rightfully belonging to a class by that class, rather than as Bourdieu understood them, as attributes that are actually transmitted from parents to children (Bourdieu, 1996; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Lin, 1999). The importance of cultural capital cannot be understated as these attributes often convert into tangible forms of capital such as school opportunities, academic degrees, and the resulting economic capital (Lamont & Lareau, 1988; McConoughey al., 2000; Nash, 1990).

Together, habitus and capital are played out on a field (Horvat, 2003). The field is the setting where people of differing social classes compete for limited resources (Bourdieu, 1975; Horvat, 2003; McDonough et al., 2000). While the habitus and capital of an individual will not change, the field does change (Horvat, 2003). What fields do have in common are limited resources and limited capital, which are often causes struggle as participants on a particular field vie for these limited resources (McDonough al., 2000; Nash, 1990). School choice can be viewed as a field where the participants (students and parents) contend for a spot in the best school (McDonough et.al., 2000). Field analysis is a source of rich research for researchers to document the power dynamics at play on a



particular field (Lamont & Lareau, 1988; McDonough et. al., 2000; Savage & Silva, 2013).

Finally, practice is a term that refers to the results an individual gets by playing on a particular field (Horvat, 2003; Nash, 1990). To gain optimal results, an individual must understand both the specifiers of the field they are playing and the ways to properly use their cultural capital (Horvat, 2003). Individuals may have similar habitus and cultural capital, but different skill levels in analyzing their field and approaches within it (Horvat, 2003; Nash, 1990). This means, in part, that the social class of an individual does not guarantee the same outcomes or benefits (Horvat, 2003). For example, high school students from upper middle class backgrounds are not guaranteed the same college admission results as some individuals know how to access their cultural capital more deftly than others. The idea of practice means that there is variability in results. This theory is explored in Chapter 5 when I analyze the different ways mothers in Leonard practice on the field of school choice, which result in different outcomes for their children.

**Symbolic power, exclusion, and symbolic violence.** Bourdieu's (1994) exploration of symbolic power examines the ways in which those in power have misguided notions about their own power being secured legitimately (Horvat, 2003). Bourdieu is concerned with the hidden rules in communities and cultures that are intuitively understood by the inhabitants as the cultural norm but are not articulated out loud. It is within these unspoken places that power is transmitted and preserved. (Horvat, 2003). For example, in Leonard, families know that the general education classes at WTHS are mainly students of color while the advanced track is where the majority of

Leonard students are placed. Thus, it is important to most families considering WTHS that their child is able to succeed in the advanced track. And, the school maintains this track for these students even when the vast majority of the school population gets no benefit from these extra courses, teachers, or facilities. The students from Leonard both expect and receive a different education than the majority of students attending WTHS. This is symbolic power, or an unspoken way that power is both transmitted and preserved by the dominant class (Horvat, 2003). Symbolic violence is the acceptance of dominance as the natural order, by both the dominant and the subjugated group (Horvat, 2003). In the case of WTHS both the families of Leonard and seemingly the leadership at WTHS accept and expect that students from Leonard both require and deserve a different educational experience from WTHS.

Bourdieu builds on the ideas of Weber's (1968), theory of closure, which says that social networks function by closing off access to others in order to maintain power and edge (Fiel, 2013, 2015; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Bourdieu also originated the idea of indirect exclusion (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Bourdieu's idea of indirect exclusion is concerned with the ways in which the dominant group uses their power to normalize belief systems. These systems become part of the structure that judges individuals and either admits or excludes them from the dominant group (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). In the structure of schools, it is the dominant White middle class cultural norms that exclude those groups and individuals that do not possess these norms (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). The dominant group, in this case the White middle class, can define themselves as superior by their ability to exclude less dominant groups, in this case Blacks and Latinos of low SES status. (Horvat, 2003; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Exclusion is not

acknowledged as such, but instead tacitly accepted as the way things have always been done (Horvat, 2003; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Much like symbolic power, indirect exclusion is understood as the natural order of things that are coincidental rather than the result of a dominating class exerting power over a less dominant group (Horvat, 2003). Exclusion, to Bourdieu, is the most powerful form of human dominance and the way that social groups can both knowingly and inadvertently maintain power (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). School choice in Leonard provides a clear field on which I was to document and analyze the presence of exclusion as parents and students make a high school choice.

**Bourdieu, school choice, and the familial role.** Multiple scholars have applied Bourdieu's ideas to the ways in which families either knowingly or unknowingly use school choice as a tool for social reproduction (Brantlinger, 2003; Crozier et al, 2008; Demerath, 2010; Fiel, 2015; Horvat, 2003; James et al, 2010; McDonough et al., 2000; Reay, 2000, 2005). School choice can be viewed in Bourdieu's terms as a field; a space with limited resources that are in contention (Brantlinger, 2003; Crozier et al, 2008; Demerath, 2010; Fiel, 2015; Horvat, 2003; James et al, 2010; McDonough et al., 2000; Reay, 2000, 2005; Savage & Silva, 2013). This study looks at White middle class families, whom researchers have shown have advantages on the field of school choice (Apple, 2000; Brantlinger, 2003, Lareau, 2011; Crozier et al, 2008; Demerath et al, 2010; Reay 2000, 2005). The ways that White middle class parents decide to use their advantages can vary, but the family remains as the critical link between home, school, and social reproduction (Crozier et al, 2008). It is crucial then, that when researching the experience of school choice, one closely examines the ways that families make these

choices (Reay, 2005). In particular it is the mother who is the keystone in replicating her child's social class more than the education itself (Reay, 2000; 2005).

Research on the role of the White middle class mother in steering her child's education has shown that she is perhaps the most important component of social reproduction (Brantlinger, 2003; Reay 2000, 2005). In addition to the previously discussed access to social networks, a middle class mother comes equipped to pass along the intimacies of her cultural capital to her children (Brantlinger, 2003; Reay, 2005). This intimacy is acquired through economic capital, which frees mothers' time and attention to focus on the individual needs of their children, and enrich them through a multitude of afterschool activities (Reay, 2005; Lareau, 2011). Comfort within middle class culture stems from a habitus that is rooted in confidence and entitlement that will be passed along to her children as cultural capital (Reay, 2005). Middle class mothers often have confidence in their own academic abilities and this confidence is transmitted to her children (Reay, 2005). This confidence in the academic arenas means that many middle class mothers often intercede in the schools on behalf of their child when they feel the need to (Reay, 2000, 2005). This can take the form of pushing for more challenging curriculum or even the creation of higher academic tracks (James et al, 2008). White middle class mothers seeking to develop their own children often do so at the expense, or in spite of, the needs of lower class children (Cucchiara, 2009; James et al, 2008).

The habitus of a middle class mother sharply contrasts with the working class mother (Lareau, 2011; Reay & Lucey, 2003; Willis, 1981). Working class mothers' habitus, or sense of possibility, are shaped by her lack of economic access and the results of that minimal access (Lareau, 2011; Reay & Lucey, 2003; Willis, 1981). A working

class mother will often not have the time or means to enrich her children after school or a social network that assists in these activities (Lareau, 2011; Reay & Lucey, 2003). The working class mother may not have had a positive schooling experience and often does not have the confidence in her own abilities to succeed in an academic environment, so she is unable to pass along that confidence to her children (Lareau, 2011; Reay & Lucey, 2003; Willis, 1981). Nor does her habitus encourage her to intercede in school business for the sake of her child (Lareau, 2011; Reay & Lucey, 2003; Willis, 1981). In contrast to the middle class who have reaped positive benefits from the school system (Reay, 2005), the lower class have little trust in a system that has yielded few benefits in terms of social mobility (Lareau, 2011; Willis, 1981). In resistance to this unfair system, lower class students may reject schooling (Willis, 1981). In the resistance and rejection of education comes the unintended result of replicating the social class they currently inhabit (Willis, 1981).

### **Summary**

The literature review has provided readers with rationales for the achievement gap in education, a history of desegregation and its eventual legal reversals, and the new era of school reforms including the standards movement and school choice. The review has provided evidence of the negative effects of extreme isolation and school segregation for our nation's low SES students and families of color, namely a lack of access to a middle class route. Next, I examined how school choice functions in lower and working classes and middle class families and the effects of White Middle Class families on communities in this choice process. The literature review concludes with Bourdieu's theoretical

framework and the ways in which it translates to White middle class advantage in the school choice process.

In the next chapter of this study I will outline the research design, or methodology, of a single, embedded case study that uses among other techniques, Bourdieu's framework to analyze data. A case study of White Middle Class mothers choosing a high school in Leonard is important to add to the research on the effects of school choice. First, it adds to the qualitative nature of the study by highlighting the voices of mothers in a small town as they navigate the high school choice process. Thus, the phenomena of their school choices are humanized and so better understood against mounting quantitative numerical data that shows the detrimental and segregated effects of school choice (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Also, as previously mentioned, more research is needed specifically about high school choice since most of the reviewed literature is concerned with elementary school choice. This study provides that data. Finally, insight into the mechanisms of school choice in a small town, rather than the mainly large cities that are researched, offer a different angle as most studies reviewed are based in large cities.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Design and Methodology**

This chapter describes the origins of this research project as well as the methodology chosen to pursue it. The explicit intention of this study is to understand how White Middle Class mothers in Leonard make high school choices for their children. However, within this broad question are the subtler queries that this study is concerned with including the ways that race and social class shape our ideas and decisions regarding schools and school choices. This study has been designed to understand the many layers that represent school choices from a White Middle Class mother's experiences. When I have asked myself what has driven me to pursue this project, initially it was to lay bare my perceptions of prejudice that I saw in my fellow parents. Later, I came to understand my own complicity in the cycles of social reproduction and I document this complicity in this chapter. It seemed important, then, to document the complexities that make up parental school choice so that there is an empirical study dedicated to this complexity with the intention of influencing school choice policy. Furthermore, in documenting and analyzing the conversations surrounding the White Middle Class mother's high school choices I am doing the important work of the qualitative researcher as I am humanizing the experience of school choice (Merriam, 1998; Van Manen, 1990). Qualitative research complements the already existing research on this subject matter, which tends to be quantitative or more statistical in nature (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Research was also needed on the experience of high school choice as the majority of reviewed literature concerns elementary school choice. And, examining the effects of school choice in a small town

offers a different lens to view the phenomena since the majority of the reviewed literature is set in big cities.

### **Qualitative Methodology**

A qualitative case study was the most suitable form of methodology for this inquiry since qualitative research allows a researcher to explore the same topic in depth from a variety of angles (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). A case study binds a study contextually, and simultaneously offers an in-depth investigation of the phenomena (Yin, 2014). A qualitative case study design requires many steps in order to maintain its integrity. The steps taken to design this research are discussed in detail in this chapter.

Qualitative research is valuable research because it ventures deeply into a chosen area and looks at a variety of angles to better understand its broader effects (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Several characteristics of qualitative research make it the best methodology for this particular study (Merriam, 1998). The primary characteristic of qualitative research is that it seeks to understand the meanings that participants are making of their own experiences with high school choice rather than having a preconceived theory before beginning research (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In order to capture the lived experiences of participants, qualitative research usually occurs in the field and requires a multitude of data sources to triangulate data and strengthen the research findings (Creswell, 1997; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). I looked closely at the high school choice process in Leonard through the individual, lived experiences of mothers (Merriam, 1998; Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Van Manen, 1990). Rather than produce findings that are numerical in nature, qualitative research produces richly nuanced descriptions of the experiences of participants, as well as the observations and notes of the researcher



(Merriam, 1998). My data collection methods, discussed in detail later in the chapter, included several tactics designed to produce these detailed and descriptive findings.

The qualitative researcher takes part in the research process by collecting and analyzing data (Merriam, 1998; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). This proximity to participants means I can shape the data by my mere presence (Merriam 1998). In order to bring awareness to this dynamic I remained explicitly reflective of my own bias and strove to present the participants' versions of their lived experiences not my own versions of them (Merriam 1998; Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Peshkin, 1980). One way I explicitly address my own bias is by sharing my own worldview and philosophical beliefs. These insights are so that both myself and my reader understand the rationale behind my chosen methodology, and my approach to data analysis (Creswell et al, 2007). They are presented below.

**Origins of the study and role of the researcher.**

*“All of our statements about others are, very significantly, also about ourselves”*

*(Kreiger, 1996, p.180)*

This study originated when I was a long term resident in the town of Leonard. In Leonard, one pressing issue facing parents was where to send their children to high school. The local high school, Western Town, has had a tough reputation in Leonard for decades. Many mothers my age attended Western Town and had a challenging experience in the school. They were often ambivalent about sending their own children to Western Town as they anticipated a challenging high school experience for them as well. Students from Leonard are in the racial and economic minority at Western Town. The introduction of school choice in 2011 meant that parents in Leonard for the first time had

the opportunity to choose another public school for their child to attend. Many families set their sights on Jewel High School, however some did not. I had been privy to these often charged conversations for years and my research was initially aimed at documenting these conversations as unique and worthy of study. But, through my literature review I learned that Leonard was not unique in its choice patterns. Instead, Leonard is a unique case in which to document the very common problem of school choice exacerbating competition and deepening social class divides.

**Reflexivity.** Reflexivity in qualitative research means that the researcher has “positioned” herself in the writing through exposing the ways that her experiences, biases, and habitus interact with and shape the study (Creswell, 2007, p. 216). Disclosing this information and its potential effect on the study is a valuable way to strengthen its validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Reflexivity has two parts; the first involves a disclosure of past experiences, and the second is the way that these experiences may shape the analysis and conclusions that the researcher finds (Creswell, 2007). Pierre Bourdieu, whose ideas shape this study, stressed a reflexive practice, which in Bordieuan terms means that the practitioner is aware of the ways that their predilections and perceptions (habitus) influence their analysis of the data (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Horvat, 2003). Provided is an overview of my background, the origins of interest in this study, and any foreseen biases. Active attention to bias and continued self- reflection will serve to combat the effects of bias on my study (Creswell, 2007).

**Researcher identity.** I was raised in a White upper middle class neighborhood and attended well regarded, public middle and high schools that were racially and economically diverse. During high school I had close friends who were lower middle

class but I did not know of any friends who lived at or near the poverty level. My social experience was that my intimate friends were White and middle or upper class. Even though tensions did arise occasionally around race, class, and religion (I remember a heated assembly in relation to the Rodney King beating) my personal experiences were that race and class conflicts played a small role in school.

While I was vaguely aware of social class and race throughout my formative years, I was very aware of religious persecution and think I developed a desire to address social injustice due to this. My family is Jewish, and although I would not characterize our conversations as overly concerned with differences in race or class, we did identify with suffering and mistreatment. The synagogue I attended growing up required that we perform “mitzvot”, or acts of caretaking. My family and religious community had an expectation that its youth would participate in acts of service, and this expectation has stayed with me through adulthood, and is one that I actively pass onto my own children.

After graduation from college I attempted a few different career paths before trying out teaching. I took a position in what could be termed an apartheid school when I was twenty-four. This first hand interaction with overwhelming poverty and apartheid schooling continues to inform my thinking about schools and drive my professional practice. The children were products of a community overrun by blight, violence, and drugs. Their difficulties were overwhelming, seemingly unsolvable, and heartbreaking. The children were also hilarious, silly, and loving. It was a bittersweet experience. It was sweet because I found a professional passion. It was bitter because while I left the school several years later due to a move, most of these children did not leave. They went on to repeat the cyclical poverty of their community, just like I repeated the cycles of

professionalism and middle class life that I saw in my formative years. The experience of teaching in an apartheid school continues shape and motivate me almost fifteen years later. It certainly is one of the undertones of this study, which questions the possibility of equity within school choice programming.

The final piece of my identity to address is motherhood. Becoming a parent has caused a struggle within me to reconcile my espoused educational ideologies with my actions as a parent (Argyris & Schoen, 1974). As an educator I believe passionately in equitable and diverse schools, but as a parent I found myself sending my children to an overwhelmingly White middle class public school. When I was unhappy with the White middle class public school, I was able to choose a private school that I loved for my children and enrolled them there. My personal struggles with school choice have prompted me to explore my own bias and caused me to reflect upon the complexity of each parent's struggle to do what is best for their child. My desire to give my children what they need currently has outweighed my personal convictions. This troubles me; How can we help each other if we want to protect our own first? Yet, it also served to decrease my bias towards my study's participants. This insight remained with me throughout my data collection and analysis and allowed the words of my participants to speak for themselves. Furthermore, my personal struggle to protect and position my children, often at the expense of a greater good, remained a theme throughout data analysis, and informed any conclusions drawn.

**Bourdieu and the constructionist paradigm.** My worldview regarding my qualitative case study research falls within a constructionist paradigm. This paradigm understands belief- systems as constructed through personal experiences, and thus,

contextual in nature (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The context of Leonard was crucial to this study as was the way it shaped each individual. And, the topic of school choice resonated differently with mothers depending on their own individual contexts including family size, finances, and religion (Lareau, 2011). The constructionist paradigm views the personal experience as part of a larger collective experience (Rutkowski & Smits, 2001). This viewpoint aligns with Bourdieu's perspective framing this study, which recognized that the structure of a culture is always present in the individual (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1992; Horvat, 2003; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In the case of Leonard, individual beliefs about high school choices were shaped by the cultural experiences of the participating individual, as well as by the dominant structures of the White middle classes. A White middle class mother is shaped by, and shapes her child's experiences according to her habitus, and in turn is shaped by the structures that support and proliferate her cultural dominance (Horvat, 2003; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). My role in data analysis was to illuminate both parts of the interview subject; her habitus, which shapes her school choices, as well as any structures or institutions that may have molded her perspectives and actions (Horvat, 2003; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Seidman, 2006).

**Assumptions.** A constructionist worldview also means that the researcher is subject to self-construction and must continually analyze the role that her assumptions play in data collection and analysis (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Bourdieu asserted that the researcher must have enough self-awareness to remain neutral in their assumptions during data collection and analysis in order to remain as objective as possible (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1990; Horvat, 2003). Both Bourdieuan and constructivist researchers strive for rich data collection, often in the form of ethnographies or case studies, to let readers

draw their own conclusions about the data rather than assert their own (Stake, 1995). Bourdieu's tenets are meant to push researchers as close to the many sources of structural power that allow for individual domination and subjugation, including the power that resides within the researcher (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1990; Horvat, 2003; Peshkin, 1988). This power needs to be explicitly addressed by the researcher in order to neutralize it.

Part of my data collection included my systematic reflective piece where I actively documented the ways that my own habitus influenced my feelings towards my fellow community members (Peshkin, 1980; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). This document was a way to explicitly practice self-awareness, neutralize power dynamics, and maintain transparency. Alongside of this document are some long held beliefs I hold about human nature and school integration (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). I share these beliefs now so that the reader and myself remain aware of these assumptions and can work to pinpoint if they are shaping data collection or analysis:

I assume that the majority of mothers will make the decision that they think is best for their child even if it may not serve the greater social good (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2003; Wall, 2017). I believe parents with economic clout will use their financial resources to directly benefit their child and not for the benefit of all children within shared communities (Roda & Wells, 2013; Wall, 2017). I believe that middle and upper class families view school as a place of competition for future educational and professional pursuits (Fiel, 2013/2015). Finally, I believe that the dominant cultural ideals of the White middle and upper classes shape our current educational institutions and ideals (Lareau, 2011; Lamont & Lareau, 1988).

## **Research Questions**

Strongly defined research questions are critical to qualitative research in order for the research to stay focused and for the study to be completed in a timely manner (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Yin, 2014). My research topic originated because I was living in, and witnessing, a small town being directly affected in various ways by high school choice. School choice is a very broad topic. The focus of this study is to understand the myriad of factors that go into an individual mother making a high school choice in Leonard City and how these choices are affected by her habitus, cultural capital, and her ability to practice both (Horvat, 2003). Additionally, this study seeks to make visible the power dynamics and structures which support the repetition, and reproduction of social class (Bourdieu & Passaron, 1990; McDonough al., 2000). Thus, the research questions that this study asked are:

1. How and why do White middle class mothers in Leonard make their specific high school choices for their children?
2. How are these individual choices affected by and shaped by living in Leonard City?
3. How are these choices grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theories of habitus and cultural capital?

## **Research Inquiry**

Case study is a specific method of research inquiry in which the researcher investigates a chosen experience through the examination of one (or multiple) cases over time (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Case study was the appropriate method for my research since my questions began with how and why, the actions of my participants were not

manipulated by me, the context of this case was important, and the boundaries between the context of my case and the case itself can sometimes seem unclear (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014). In case study research it is essential for the researcher to create the boundaries of the case in order to have a focused unit of analysis and a manageable scope (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In this case I studied the factors that influenced a White Middle Class mother of an eighth grader's high school choice for her child (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2014). In choosing to examine solely White, middle class mothers of eighth graders I have created a tight boundary on who or what can be analyzed in this research.

Context is also central to case study methodology, and in this case the context of Leonard City was the catalyst for this research (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014). My study originated because I was living in Leonard City and witnessing the effects of high school choice on this community firsthand (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2013). As I previously mentioned, I had originally intended that my research would document Leonard families' unique experiences with high school choice. However, my literature review led to my realization that Leonard City is not unique in the ways that families experienced school choice. Instead, it offered a specific context in which I could begin to document the complexities underscoring the school choice process (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Other local towns involved in the study, Jewel or Western Town, could also provide a lens through which to examine the effects of high school choice in a small town, but logistically the relationships I had built in Leonard allowed an accessibility to research participants (Patton, 1990; Rossman & Rallis, 2012, Yin, 2014). I also had a general understanding of the culture of Leonard City, which proved helpful in compiling my research tactics, and was continually monitored for bias (Seidman, 2006). And, it was



appealing to study the effects of high school choice in a small town because most of the previous research occurred in large cities. Thus, Leonard City was thoughtfully chosen as the context of this case study.

My case study design is that of an embedded case study (Yin, 2014). This means that within the single, bounded case of White middle class high school choice in Leonard are the individual experiences of each mother (Yin, 2014). These individual experiences, the heart of qualitative research, offer the reader a richer understanding of the complexities of high school choice both in Leonard City and in general (Creswell et. al, 2007; Yin, 2014). Multiple embedded units of analysis add depth to a case study because they provide opportunities for a richer analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Having multiple units to analyze in this study meant that I was able to analyze each mother's experience, compare experiences to see how the context of Leonard, and its social structures and institutions may have shaped individual choices, and look across all of the experiences for themes that demonstrated the complexity of school choice in relationship to Bourdieu's theories of habitus and cultural capital (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014).

**Essential elements.** Yin (2014), whose framework is the backbone of my case study methodology, has offered five essential elements when designing an effective case study. These elements include the aforementioned well developed research questions, as well as propositions, units of analysis, logic linking data to prepositions, and a criteria for interpreting the findings (Yin, 2014). In adhering to these elements I was able to keep my research focused, timely, systematic, and rigorous (Yin, 2014). A description and application of each is provided below.

**Defined propositions.** Yin (2014) stresses the importance of propositions.

Propositions focus the study on specific areas that the researcher needs to address within the chosen topic (Yin, 2014). The topic of school choice is too vague to allow for a timely, critical study (Yin, 2014). I needed to clarify why I was drawn to studying school choice in Leonard, and share how I arrived at an underlying understanding of those interests (Yin, 2014). My literature review formed and crystallized these understandings and became the basis of my propositions, which gave focus and purpose to my research questions (Yin, 2014). The study's first proposition is that the educational experiences of the parents will shape the school choices that they make for their children (Hanah-Jones, 2016; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Olson, 2009). The second proposition is that the individual needs of a child will shape the choices school parents make for their child (Demerath et. at. 2010; Reinoso, 2008). The third proposition is that social class is a vital determinant for the school choices that families make for their children (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, Evans and Yee, 2012; Roda & Wells, 2012). The fourth proposition is families in higher social classes compete to place their children in advantageous school options (Crozier et. al, 2008; Demerath, Lynch, Williams, Peters & Davidson, 2010; Fiel, 2015; Reay & Lucey, 2003; Reay, 2005). The fifth proposition is that middle class school competition hurts the schooling choices and experiences of those who are not middle class (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2013; Kozol, 2005; Reay & Lucey, 2003; Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Rothstein 2013/2015). The final proposition is that race and social class are intertwined and thus, school choice often puts students of color at a disadvantage (Kozol 1991/2005; Horvat, 2003/2006; Massey & Denton, 1993).

**Defined units of analysis.** Yin's (2014) third element, the unit of analysis or the case, further binds the study to a specific concern. A clear unit of analysis, or a clear case, is the very definition of a case study and keeps research focused and able to be completed in a timely fashion (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). I chose to focus on White Middle Class mothers of eighth graders from Leonard City as this study's unit of analysis for a variety of reasons. These reasons complimented my propositions, which are focused on choices families make, the ways that these choices reproduce social class, and how this reproduction disadvantages low SES students and students of color. The choices that the White middle class make have a tremendous effect on their local schools in terms of the funding, reputation, and the potential academic achievement of its students (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Brantlinger, 2003; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Demerath and et al., 2010; Lareau, Evans & Yee, 2016; Lareau & Goyette, 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013). In purposefully selecting White middle class mothers of eighth graders to interview, I sought to document their choices and analyze whether or not their choices aligned with or deviated from my proposed propositions.

I have further focused this study solely on mothers because White middle class mothers most often direct the academic lives of their children (Kimelberg, 2014; Lareau, 2011; Reinoso, 2008). They are the keystones in replicating the White middle class social structure (Reay, 2000/2005). White middle class mothers often possess a habitus that is comfortable and confident in the academic arena (Lareau, 2011; Reay, 2005). This comfort allows the White middle class mother to interact purposefully with a school, request changes, and advocate in the interests of her own child (James et al., 2008). And, I chose mothers of eighth graders since they were precisely in the midst of the often

unbearable, anxiety filled process of school choice (Milner, 2010; Roda & Wells, 2013). Their experiences provided the rawest data in the moment of these tensions and anxieties (Roda & Wells, 2013). Finally, I am a White middle class mother, and this study is in part a self-actualization study (Kreiger, 1996). Through the methodology of intentional and active self-reflection I tried to come to terms with my own parental choices and their implications for social reproduction much in the same way I made sense of my participants' choices (Kreiger, 1996. Peshkin, 1988; Horvat, 2003; Quirk, 1998).

**Defining middle class.** Class definition arises through the examination of many markers including income, academic credentials, home ownership, economic security, professional choices, and even social or cultural ideals (Pew, 2015). It was important to this study that I was clear about how it defined middle class. Since I asked potential participants for their private information, I wanted to be the least invasive as possible while still being able to standardize criteria. At first, I thought I could screen each potential participant through educational attainment levels using an IRB approved flyer that I was meant to be distributed to all eighth graders in their school (see Appendix A) (Yin, 2014). When I was not granted permission to distribute this flyer, I had to solicit participants through a known source. This source only asked mothers who had eighth grade children and either attended college, have a college degree, or had degrees beyond college (Kochhar & Morin, 2014). Most of my participants had professional degrees. All but one had graduated from college. Clarifying boundaries served to define what the units of analysis were, thus strengthening the case study model (Yin, 2014).

**Linking data to propositions.** The fourth element of Yin's case study design expects that researchers should collect data with the intention of linking it to propositions

(Yin, 2014). This effort focuses on the data collection and analysis on the tight scope of the propositions ensuring that the study can be completed in a timely manner (Yin, 2014). Linking data to propositions also provides the researcher with a structural support when analyzing their findings (Baxter & Jack, 2008). For example, my second proposition is that the individual needs of the child will shape the choices that parents make for their child. With this in mind I designed interview questions aimed at collecting data that would relate to these propositions, and I analyzed the collected data in multiple ways to demonstrate the validity (or invalidity) of these propositions based upon possible rival findings (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014).

### **Data Collection**

Yin (2014) advocates four data collection principles to adhere to for rigor's sake. I employed these principles in my data collection to enhance the validity of my piece. The first principle is to use multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2014). Multiple sources of evidence allow for the emergence of rich detail and multiple perspectives that are necessary in qualitative research (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Yin, 2014). They also allow the researcher to triangulate data and ensure that conclusions drawn are based upon multiple pieces of evidence across data (Yin, 2014). My multiple sources of data include interviews, documents, field notes, and reflective journals (Yin, 2014). The second principle, creating a case study database, organizes and documents the collected research for others to follow (Yin, 2014). Interview transcripts were kept in a secure folder and notes made were kept in online secure database. Field notes were initially written in a labeled notebook and then drafted online in a secure google drive folder. My reflection journal is kept in a secure google drive folder. Principle three asks researchers to

maintain a chain of evidence so that research conclusions can be traced back and forth across accessible evidence (Yin, 2014). To that end I can provide alongside my case study report, the above mentioned database of fieldnotes and reflection journal, printed transcripts of my interviews, and a clear reference and citations page (Yin, 2014). The fourth principle cautions researchers to take care when using data from electronic sources (Yin, 2104). The majority of my online sources came through my university library (Yin, 2014). Those that did not were because they sourced from local newspapers and local online sites.

### **Data Collection Methods**

There are a variety of approaches that a qualitative case study researcher can use in order to collect data. Yin (2014) discusses six forms of case study data collection methods including documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and physical artifacts. Regardless of which methods are used, each method has a protocol meant to ensure a methodical approach to data and elucidate the chain of reasoning asked of each researcher (Yin, 2014). Below is an explanation of the methods and protocols I used collect data explicitly meant to answer my research questions.

**Interviews.** Interviews, specific conversations with the intention of answering the research questions, are a vital part of data for this study as they allow me to have access to the inner life of participants currently engaging in the high school choice process (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). Case study interviews most often call for a semi-structured, emergent interview protocol, which allow dialogue to unfold naturally in an unbiased fashion (Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Yin, 2014). My interviews lasted about an hour

and focused on the meaning that participants made of their experiences with school choice (Yin, 2014). Shorter interviews require a specific attention to protocol in order to ensure lines of inquiry are answered (Yin, 2014). Interview protocol for this study included an interview guide with around eight open-ended questions specifically designed to answer the research questions (See Appendix B) (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interview questions, developed from my research sub-questions, were pilot tested by three acquaintances who did not participate in my study to ensure that the questions were easily understood and could answer my research questions (Yin, 2014). After the initial interviews I developed three follow up questions to ask in order to collect data on specific themes that emerged from the initial interviews (See Appendix D). These follow up questions were IRB approved and participants answered them over the phone.

A crucial component to interviewing is remaining open and aware of power dynamics between the interviewee and interviewer (Kvale, 2006; Yin, 2014). Reflexivity, or the influence that an interviewer subtly exerts on their subject's responses is particularly insidious to an interview (Yin, 2014). Having an awareness of reflexivity and actively reflecting upon it does much to alleviate its existence in an interview (Yin, 2014). Other ways I actively challenged power dynamics in the interview was to allow participants to choose the setting in order to maximize their comfort level (Kvale, 2006). Most met at my home, one chose their home, and a few chose public places. I recorded interviews, with the permission of participants, so that I was able to both listen to the recordings and have them professionally transcribed for accuracy's sake (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Participants were given the opportunity to read the transcripts and offer feedback (Yin, 2014). Tape recording alleviated the pressure of taking perfect notes and

allowed me to fully focus on the interview (Yin, 2014). Transcripts also offered greater reliability as I could continually consult them. They were a resource of triangulation for any conclusions I was making in Chapter 5 (Yin, 2014).

**Participant selection.** Participant selection was tricky in a small town. As a former local mother I know either intimately or through word of mouth many of the other local Leonard families. In order to strive for objectivity I implemented purposeful selection; participants had to meet certain criteria in order to join the study (Patton, 1990). This criteria included being White, Middle class, mother of an eighth grader. Middle class has been defined in this study as attending some college. My criteria of choosing eighth grade mothers also prevented me from selecting some of my closest friends, thus distancing me from the majority of my participants (Seidman, 2006). I initially attempted to use a systematic method to solicit eighth grade families for interviews (Seidman, 2006). The Leonard school superintendent I had known had originally granted me permission to disseminate information to parents through the school wide folder system (Seidman, 2006). However, by the time my study was approved by the Institutional Review Board, the leadership had changed and the new superintendent did not grant permission. I had to rely on a personal friend to procure me participants for this study. Rubin and Rubin (2012) wrote that it is common practice to find research participants through a known person or persons who are also a member of the group one is researching. This strategy is called snowball or chain sampling (Patton, 1990). In asking a friend to solicit eighth grade mothers it distanced me from participant selection, thus helping to avoid personal biases (Patton; 1990; Rossman & Rallis, 2012).



While this was not my preferred method of participant solicitation, it is research based and it allowed me to gather willing participants.

**Sample size.** Until recent years there has been no standard number of interviews needed in qualitative research to satisfy meeting the expectations of the research (Hennink, 2017). Recent literature presents two methodological studies aimed at quantifying this number to show how many interviews are necessary to achieve code saturation (Hennink, 2017). Code saturation is when the study has exhausted all of the themes found in the interviews and no new ones are being found (Hennink, 2017). One study shows between eight to sixteen interviews are adequate to achieve code saturation or thematic understanding (Namey, Guest, McKenna & Chen, 2016). A more recent and thorough study surmises that nine interviews are considered the number necessary to achieve code saturation (Hennink, 2017). This study also finds that the first interview of a study is the most important as it sets the initial codes that often persevere for the entirety of the study (Hennik, 2017). However, it also points to the difficulty in using the number nine as a standard interview number since code saturation is a multi-faceted term (Hennink, 2017). One may have found all of the codes that outline a study by interview nine, but understanding each code, or theme, can require richer and more detailed interviewing (Hennink, 2017). To reach a deeper complexity of themes, the literature suggests sixteen to twenty four interviews (Hennink, 2017). Even with these parameters in place it is still important for the researcher to outline when they believe they have reached the code saturation needed to answer their own research questions (Hennink, 2017). A study seeking to develop theory and understand the complexities of a phenomena may need a larger sample size, and that is why I initially wanted sixteen

interviews (Hennink, 2017). However, I also had to be realistic. My advisor was concerned that sixteen interviews would be too data for a new researcher (Yin, 2014). I was also concerned I would not be able to solicit sixteen participants. In the end I decided that if I solicited at least eight interviews my sample size would be research based and I could collect enough data to satisfy code saturation (Hennink, 2017; Namey, Guest, McKenna & Chen, 2016). I ended up with ten interviews and am satisfied that all areas of the high school choice process were covered in these ten interviews since they began to overlap.

**Field notes.** Field notes provide the rich descriptions of settings, personal observations, anecdotes from interviews and informal dialogues on the street that are crucial for qualitative research and its goal of examining phenomenon from a variety of angles (Merriam, 1998; Rossman & Rallis, 2009). Field notes also capture personal reflections, thoughts, reactions, or struggles evoked by the collected data or towards the research design (Rossman & Rallis, 2009). They are the primary way that case studies capture evidence which corroborates with and triangulates research conclusions (Yin, 2014). My field note protocol included writing a field note after each interview to quickly capture my initial experiences (Yin, 2014). Then, later in the evening, I transcribed this initial field note into a secure database with further commentary and reflections regarding the interview (Yin, 2014). The goal of the field notes is to help answer research questions so they should remain focused on research questions so as not to over collect irrelevant data (Lareau, 1996; Yin, 2014). To help focus on this goal I wrote an analysis of each field note in light of my research questions to see whether or not they were remaining relevant to the questions (Lareau, 1996). I also began preliminary coding after each

interview to look for emerging themes (Hennink, 2017). This preliminary analysis helped me remain focused on my research goals. It also allowed me to see that a follow up interview was necessary because there were themes in the initial data that required more questioning.

**Reflective journaling.** Reflection is the intentional act of capturing of one's own thoughts, feelings, biases, and concerns with the subject matter being researched (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). By methodically separating the researcher's personal reactions to data from the participants, the researcher becomes more equipped to look at data as be objectively as possible and avoid reactionary conclusions (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Yin, 2014). My reflective journal was started in the very beginning stages of my dissertation journey and these entries capture my initial forays into my topic. The journal continued to capture my frustrations, questions, and personal growth throughout this process. This personal growth has made me a more objective as a researcher since it made me more self-aware and challenged my assumptions towards my subject matter (Peshkin, 1980; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). My reflection journal remained a space throughout my study where I confronted my subjective nature towards my research (Creswell, 2007; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). This journal formed the body of evidence for my role in this study (Creswell, 2007; Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Yin, 2009).

**Document analysis.** Jewel High School became a choice high school for Leonard in 2011 and this experience has been documented in the local press. I investigated the local papers for stories regarding JHS's school choice in the area and searched for articles from 2011-2019. Some articles were suggested to me by my interview participants and those were included in the study too. These news reports were a rich source of context for

the ways that high school choice was experienced by the town of Jewel. They also provided data of the opinions of local officials and residents regarding school choice in the area.

The Leonard School District has posted their school board minutes online dating back to 2011, the year Jewel High School became a choice school. I combed through these board minutes up until 2019 for discussion or comments regarding school choice. I also looked for emerging themes from the data and found several, including considerable comments related to school consolidation and the outsized school budget. Both of these themes relate to why the Leonard district is invested in sending their students to JHS. The collected data is documented in chapter 4 and analyzed in chapter 5 of this piece.

### **Data Analysis**

Data collection and analysis often happen simultaneously within qualitative research, therefore it is important to follow a specific plan for data analysis; this is the fifth element (Yin, 2014). My general strategy for analyzing data employed a thematic approach (Yin, 2014). One approach I used was to build themes that relied on my theoretical propositions (Yin, 2014). For example, my third proposition is that social class is a vital determinate for the school choices that families make. To test the validity of this proposition, my analysis actively looked for themes that related to social class within each individual's experience, between experiences, and across individual experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nycyk, 2016; Yin, 2014). Another aforementioned theoretical proposition is that high school choice in Leonard is a place of competition or, in Bordieusian terms, a field, "a contested arena that emerges from struggles over scare capital" (McDonough et.al, 2000, p. 377). During analysis I intentionally searched for the

theme of competition on the field of high school choice (McDonough, et. al., 2000).

When I did not find data that supported my propositions, I had to either retract or change them (Yin, 2014). For example, in my case study report I discussed that I had anticipated that mothers raised in Leonard or towns like it would be satisfied with the Leonard school system. I did not find consistent data to support this statement and so I retracted it in the report and discussed the findings that the data did reveal. Addressing these rival findings is considered an important step in case study analysis (Yin, 2014).

In contrast to the use of theoretical propositions in guiding analysis, I also allowed for the possibility of unanticipated themes to emerge from my data as I employed the process of working my data from the ground up (Yin, 2014). This strategy meant that instead of using the preconceived notions I had that related to my theoretical propositions I took the time to read through my data and search for patterns that were not originally anticipated (Yin, 2014). This strategy is important to case study since it allowed me the opportunity to be open to the experiences of the individual mothers in my study (Yin, 2014). Using this method of analysis, I was able to allow the unanticipated theme of gender to emerge in my findings as many of the participating mothers specifically referred to gender as a factor in their high school choice process.

**Coding and classifying information.** The process of finding themes across data for analysis is often used in qualitative research data analysis and is known as coding or classifying information (Nycyk, 2016; Seidman, 2006). Searching for themes often happens in several iterations to ensure that all themes are captured and that more prevalent themes are noted (Saldana, 2013). The first time I heard data was during my interview sessions. My initial field notes, written right after these interviews captured the

initial themes I heard (Saldana, 2009). These themes were a starting point to begin building my thematic structure but required reflection and active searches for bias too (Saldana, 2009). After this initial coding process, I listened and read the raw transcript data (Saldana, 2013). I did this exercise several times looking both for data that relate to my theoretical propositions, for unanticipated themes. This raw data best captured my participant's voices and thus, this data is was the most crucial in terms of capturing codes. Findings were then classified according to code and later analyzed in relation to the participant and crossed analyzed amongst all participants (Saldana, 2009; Yin, 2014).

**Theoretical framework.** Lastly, theory plays an integral part in rigorous case study design by allowing generalizations to be made using collected data through the lens of established theory (Yin, 2014). I grounded my study in Bourdieusian theory, which posits that individuals' choices are shaped by their habitus, and these individuals (often unconsciously) rely on their cultural capital to interact advantageously with class dominant institutions (Bourdieu & Passaron, 1990; Hovat, 2003; Lamont & Lareau, 1998; Lin, 1999). Data analysis included classifying and coding information that related to Bourdieusian theory (Saldana, 2013). Through Bourdieu's lens I was able to ground my case study in a broader field, have a logical way to interpret data, and have the ability to make broader generalizations about the individual experiences of my participants (Yin, 2009). Bourdieu's theories allowed me to examine the White Middle Class families of Leonard as not solely unique, but rather commonly understood as human beings acting in their best interests on the field of school choice (Bourdieu & Passaron, 1990; Horvat, 2003).

## **Ethical Concerns**

Ethical issues must be considered in all research, and qualitative research follows specific principles researchers must adhere to in order to produce recognized ethical work (Flick, 2007). Ethical treatment of participants is paramount in research and my study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval before I conducted my research (Yin, 2014). IRBs were first instituted after mistreatment by researchers on fellow human beings in the cause for research came to light (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). IRBs ensure that researchers take proper care of their subjects, which includes being informed about the research process and the expectations of participation by the researcher and consenting to them (Yin, 2014). Participants were treated with care throughout my research process and few missteps were documented. Those missteps are of use for reflective purposes and as learning experiences for future studies I undertake (Lareau, 1996).

**Validity.** In order for qualitative research to be considered trustworthy and credible, it must have the qualities of both internal and external validity (Merriam, 1998). Internal validity is acquired through formal steps taken to ensure data collection, and inferences drawn from that data that are credible to readers (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Yin, 2014). External validity is concerned with the ways that the findings of the study can be generalized to the larger population outside of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). External validity cannot be considered without the qualities of internal validity (Merriam, 1998). Steps taken to ensure internal validity differ due to the researcher and their approach, therefore I have articulated the particular strategies I have chosen to ensure

research credibility and establish validity (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Yin, 2014).

**Triangulation.** Triangulation of data means that multiple forms of data have been compared, and conclusions reached are based on what is seen throughout the data versus from one source (Yin, 2014). Triangulation is a crucial method for valid case study and assures readers that my conclusions are based on similar findings seen throughout the data (Merriam, 1998; Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Yin, 2014 ). My thematic approach to data analysis ensures triangulation since I must look across all of my collected data from interviews, field notes, reflective journaling, and news articles, for emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nyeyk, 2016; Yin, 2014). Pattern matching, an analytic technique, was also be employed to search for empirical findings that were predicted beforehand (Yin, 2014). For example, I had anticipated that White Middle Class mothers' choices would be shaped by their own habitus. When I found data that supported this prediction, my study became more valid (Yin, 2014). It was equally important to examine data that offered alternative explanations to my own (Yin, 2014). For example, I previously noted that I had anticipated that if mothers were raised in small towns, they would like the Leonard school district and that they would end up choosing JHS. However, my data did not support this and I had to address this alternative finding. My willingness to address rival explanations reassures readers that I am letting the data speak rather than relying on my personal assumptions (Yin, 2014).

**Addressing bias.** In some way the researcher always inserts herself into the research (Peshkin, 1988). Thus, the positionality of the researcher and the potential for bias must be continually addressed throughout the study (Creswell, 2007). I have



addressed my positionality earlier in this chapter and have included intentional reflection as a research strategy to monitor for bias (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2014). I also wrote in my reflective journal on many days throughout this multi-year study in an effort to capture my ambivalence, judgement, and beliefs during and after data collection (Merriam, 1998). During analysis I used my journal to shed light on the ways that I too am part of a dominant structure, and how my own habitus affected this study (Merriam, 1998). The conclusion of my study speaks heavily about the ways I was personally affected during the timeline of this project.

Another tactic to strengthen validity is the use of peer critique (Merriam, 1998). A trusted colleague read and critiqued my emerging findings to offer feedback on my chain of logic (Merriam, 1998). Peer critiques could find rival explanations to conclusions, which are critical to explore throughout the case study (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). However, my peer critique found that my conclusions were sound and made good sense to him.

**External validity.** External validity is concerned with the ways that the findings of the study can be generalized to the larger population outside of the study. Qualitative research is concerned with illuminating specific phenomena in depth (Lareau, 1996). Its relatively small sample sizes make it difficult to generalize to larger populations (Lareau, 1996; Merriam, 1998; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). One approach qualitative researchers can take to generalize a case is to describe the particulars of each case so richly that their readers begin to see the applications to themselves and the society around them (Merriam, 1998). The researcher, then, is not responsible to making the generalizations or argument, but instead provides a lens through which the reader can see a universal truth,

much like the way an author can write a novel, no matter its subject, and the reader can relate to its universal truths (Merriam, 1998). In my study I worked hard to show how WMC mothers residing in Leonard City made choices their children. I presented these particular experiences and offered my analysis. It is up to the reader to decide whether they can see how high school choice in Leonard has perpetuated social class reproduction and deepened racial and social divides. It is also up to the reader to draw their own conclusions regarding what should be done to manage school choice programming.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter 3, Methodology, has presented the origins of my study, my position within the study, and the research methods I have chosen to pursue it. I have also included a theoretical framework that guided my analysis as well as the general analytic tactics employed. A case study that is small in scope allowed me to delve deeply into a specific group's experience with school choice. Using this small scope allowed me to finish my project in a timely manner and offered insights into the larger experience of school choice. The methodological approaches and strategies I used to conduct my research were of sound case study design, that were geared towards the needs of this research. My research project was timely, empirically sound, and suitable to the type of research I would like to conduct. Thus, I am present the next stages of my research in Chapter 4, data collection.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

This study sought to understand the ways that White middle class mothers in the small town of Leonard City make sense of the high school choices they make for their children. Leonard provides a unique context to study the ways that White middle class mothers negotiate and optimize their high school options. Chapter 4 presents the findings from this study. This chapter includes Leonard's School Board minutes from 2010-2019 to provide context of ongoing district issues. It also shares findings from the past ten years of local news sources regarding the introduction of school choice to the area. I next present data from each of the ten interviews with Leonard City mothers. These initial in-person interviews were conducted over a three week period, with follow-up phone interviews taking place several months after the initial interviews..

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this case study and remained the point of reference for the developing themes in the data include:

1. How and why do White middle class mothers in Leonard make their specific high school choices for their children?
2. How are these individual choices affected by and shaped by living in Leonard City?
3. How are these choices grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theories of habitus and cultural capital?

The first question was designed to assess the variety of factors that White Middle Class mothers in Leonard consider when making high school choices. The second research

question seeks to answer the ways that local politics, social ties, and small town life affect high school choice in Leonard City. Finally, the last question is meant to explore the effects of racism and classism, underlying these choices. A case study was designed to examine the unique context of high school choice in Leonard City. Qualitative methods to collect data included semi-structured interviews, field notes, reflective journaling, and document analysis of news articles and school board meetings. Below is a summation of this data.

### **Context: An Overview of the Board Minutes and Pertinent News Articles**

I reviewed the Leonard City Board of Education minutes from July, 2010 through March, 2019 as well as the local papers mentioned in the Board minutes. I also examined the local newspapers connected to Jewel and Leonard Cities. These Board minutes and news articles provide context for the role of high school choice within the Leonard community and Jewel City. The news articles, in particular, situate the unique experience of school choice for WTHS, JHS, and Leonard City within the larger, national conversations of school choice.

#### *Board of Education (BOE) Minutes*

The Leonard school district has had a declining year round population for many years due to a combined loss of business in the area and the rise of vacation homeowners (March, 2019). The shrinking student population means that the budget for Leonard schools should be shrinking too. Constituents, particularly vacation-home owners, have been vocal about the discrepancy between small student populations and large school budgets. These constituents and various community members want the school district to downsize into one building and not spend tax dollars unnecessarily (February, 2018).

Local citizens of Leonard, often members of the community for several generations, do not want part-time residents involved in school decision making. The School Board, in response, tries to appease both sides by demonstrating areas in which the district has been responding to the shrinking population while simultaneously working to show that the Leonard schools are an important attraction for potential homeowners (September, 2016, October 2016, November, 2016, March, 2017, May, 2018).

In order to keep control of the schools in local hands, the Leonard School Board has been structured so that it is comprised of mayoral appointees. This structure is a source of contention for second home owners since none sit on the school board. The majority of Board members have children in the Leonard School District and their interests lie in preserving the resources of the school. However, the school- aged population decline<sup>4</sup> and the school budget (per pupil) have led to vocal complaints against unfair property taxes from second home owners. Leonard has a school budget that exceeds \$30,000 dollars per pupil (May, 2018, 2019). The closest metropolitan city to Leonard has a little over a \$9,000 per pupil budget. Opponents of the school budget would like to see Leonard merge with the adjoining school district of Walden in order to alleviate unnecessary tax burdens (September 2015, February 2016, March 2017). The Leonard school board and staff have vehemently opposed this idea but have also investigated it as a possibility, too, through a formal inquiry by the past superintendent (October, November, 2016). There are a variety of reasons cited for not consolidating school districts, but the Board minutes make it clear that Leonard wants to keep its schools separate from Walden. One of my interview participants, Evelyn, a Walden

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<sup>4</sup> In 2019 several grades held no more than ten students in a classroom and yet the the district budgeted for two classroom when one would be sufficient. This meant two teacher salaries.

School district employee shared in her interview that combining districts would increase diversity. Evelyn believed this would ultimately be positive for Leonard. She shares in her interview, “I think that’s what scares people, not just the people coming in, but ...what does it mean financially? I do think it’s going to happen...within the next ten years I think it’ll happen.” For the 2019-2020 school year the Leonard School district decided to take tuition students in order to bolster student numbers and allow Leonard schools to stay separate from Walden. This Board decision has incensed certain citizens who see it as a way to avoid needed consolidation (June, 2019).

The School Board of Leonard remains focused on presenting to the public that it has not increased its budget in over ten years (May, 2018). The reasons for this budget stalemate can be attributed to two facts. First, as Leonard teachers age and then retire, new ones are not hired (March 2017, October, 2018). Hence, the district is able to cut staff without layoffs. The other way that Leonard is able to maintain its budget is through school choice (local news source, 2019). Leonard is its own K-8 district, but it has no high school. When students go to Western Town High School, Leonard must pay WTHS tuition. However, if students go to Jewel High School, due to state school choice policy, the state pays the tuition, leaving Leonard without the burden of cost. This benefit incentivizes the Leonard school district to send their students to JHS, which also diverts resources away from WTHS. It incentivizes the Leonard School district to develop positive relationships with the Jewel School District. In contrast, it is problematic to the Leonard school budget if student enrollment at WTHS increases because that money must come out of the Leonard budget. It makes financial sense for the Leonard school district to remain uninvolved with the WTHS school community.

## **School Choice in Jewel from a Media Perspective**

Data regarding school choice in the Leonard community was gathered by searching local news sources for the topic of school choice in the three communities about which I am collecting data Leonard City, Western Town City, and Jewel City. Local sources included three newspapers that are widely distributed and mentioned by the local populations. Two of the sources were mentioned as the newspapers of record in the Leonard School Board meetings. The last source was recommended to me by a participant in my study since it had recently done a series of articles reflecting on the almost decade of school choice in the Jewel community. Below is a compilation of the findings of data.

**Why school choice works well for JHS.** The Jewel community has a lot of similarities to the Leonard community in terms of demographics and shrinking populations (local Jewel newspaper, 2/13/19). Jewel had opened a new high school in 2004 with a capacity for 1400 students, but shrinking populations meant that Jewel was concerned about being able to maintain these numbers (local Jewel newspaper, 2/13/19). Jewel made a wise move when it decided to become part of the school choice program in 2010. By 2013, Jewel received 1.5 million dollars in tuition from the state, which was an 80 % increase in its operating budget (local paper, 2013). Jewel leadership understood that the funding from a school choice program would create a buffer against their own shrinking population and bolster their own budget (local Jewel newspaper, 2/13/19). The leadership acknowledged that Jewel decided to participate in school choice because they had a new school built for 1400 students and only had around 1200 students enrolled. School choice could increase their population and drive down their operating costs (local

Jewel newspaper, 2/6/19). Still, it is relevant to note that JHS keeps its enrollment at approximately 1275 students. This number provides the funds JHS needs, and the ability to prevent overcrowding (local Jewel newspaper, 2/13/19).

**Jewel and diversity measures in its high school.** A series of articles in a local paper stated the concerns from local Jewel families if school choice came to their town. Namely, families were nervous about who might come to Jewel if the town opened up its doors to school choice (local Jewel newspaper, 2/6/2019). Citizens of Jewel voiced concern that a school choice program would encourage families from, as noted in the news article, “inner city schools” to apply (local Jewel newspaper, 2/2/2019). This concern was legitimate to Jewel citizens since demographic studies of the state that Jewel resides in showed an increase in diversity once school choice measures were initiated (local Western Town news source, 12/2/2017). The leadership in Jewel felt that with the proper measures this would not happen. The choice program was crafted to target families with, “the wherewithal to investigate the school (JHS)” and with the intention of drawing their population of students from families who were considering private, parochial options (local Jewel newspaper, 2/6/2019). This clearly shows the intention of the leadership of JHS to maintain its demographics by controlling the ways that their school diversified.

Another recent article in the local paper was dedicated to the ways that the choice program at Jewel High School increased diversity (local Jewel newspaper, 2/6/2019). In this article, JHS leadership says that JHS wanted to open its doors to students and diversify, but data from the article acknowledges that JHS is only willing to diversity within certain parameters (local Jewel newspaper, 2/6/2019). The article states, “It was



never our intent..[to open our school] to hundreds and hundreds of kids who would want to come and that is why the choice program was crafted around an academic admission and not a general one.” (local Jewel newspaper, 2/6/2019). Jewel City deliberately and intentionally crafted school choice policy that would mostly be accessible to families of economic means, and thus, historically, White families. Additionally, in the article JHS leadership notes that many families have moved into Jewel if they do not get into the high school through the lottery or if they do not meet the criteria for the lottery (local Jewel newspaper, 2/13/2019). This admission also points to recognition and tacit approval of the facts that families with economic means have the advantage of moving into the district of their choice if their child cannot gain access through the choice program.

A snapshot of the choice program has emerged from its inception in 2010. In nine years choice students at Jewel High School have increased 13% (local Jewel newspaper, 2/06/2019). In 2017- 2018 there were 194 choice students. Choice students come from nineteen area districts, all of which are larger than Leonard, many considerably so. Yet, Leonard has the highest number of choice students going to JHS. They have fifty two students at JHS, the next largest district has thirty seven choice students and that district has over 7,000 students compared to the under four hundred students enrolled in Leonard. Leonard students are the largest group of students being accepted into the choice program at JHS, demonstrating a strong relationship between the two communities (local Jewel newspaper, 2/13/2019). And, in the last nine years, demographics in Jewel High School have remained 94% White, highlighting Jewel’s lack of racial diversity within its school (US News, 2016-17). Important to note is that only one choice student in JHS is from Western Town, a historically African-American town (local Jewel newspaper,

2/13/2019). Also missing are any students from a nearby, high SES and high population of students of color district I will call Parkerstown. It is evident that rather than increase racial diversification, the addition of school choice has meant that Jewel has been able to maintain control of their both their own school system and the demographics of the students within it.

### **Participants**

Each participant took part in a face to face interview lasting approximately thirty-five minutes to an hour. Participants chose the location for the interview and I was aware of the time limit on behalf of my participants as these women had committed to an hour interview and I was reluctant to ask more from their busy lives (Kvale, 2006; Yin, 2014). A few months after our initial interview I emailed each woman, sent them their transcripts for review, and set up a follow up interview. All of the women were responsive and giving of their additional time. During the follow up phone call I asked each of the women if they had anything they wanted to share regarding the transcripts. I then asked three follow up questions that stemmed from the initial interview sessions. Below is a detailed narrative of each participant's interviews with me combining both sets of interview data. A table has been provided as a reference tool for readers as they move through each individual's story.

Table 1

*Participants*

<u>Mothers</u>	<u>High School Choice: JHS or WTHS</u>	<u>Gender of current 8<sup>th</sup> grader</u>
1. Amanda	JHS	Daughter
2. Amelia	JHS	Son
3. Erica	WTHS	Son
4. Evelyn	JHS	Son
5. Frankie	WTHS	Daughter
6. Hope	WTHS	Son
7. Kate	JHS	Son
8. Parker	JHS	Son
9. Randy	WTHS	Daughter
10. Rebecca	WTHS	Daughter

**Erica.** Erica grew up far away from Leonard. She was a child of divorce and attended boarding high school. Erica had a positive high school experience in boarding school, which had “small classrooms that catered to personal learning styles.” She met her husband in Leonard where he was born and raised and they settled there to raise

children. Erica is a stay at home mom, which she considers a privilege, “I have the luxury to be home with my kids, I consider it a luxury.” Several pages of data document Erica’s negative experiences with multiple children in the Leonard School District,

I had hoped for an academic experience like I had. Obviously [I went to] a college prep school... But, I don’t feel like my kids ever had that class or that teacher [that they thought was] great [and they never] came home and [said] you won’t believe what we learned today. I was hoping they would have that...[but] my...kids have been very unhappy with their education. I’ve been unhappy with their education Erica attributed her children’s poor experiences to a few things. The first is a lack of inspired teaching and curriculum,

When I first moved to [Leonard] I was thinking... this is great. The school is so small. They’re going to be doing all of these wonderful things...[but it is] not so...we have [an ecosystem] where they [should be outside during science class].... I am seeing some of the same projects...from twenty years ago...and I think for the compensation, for the class size, I mean it’s like a private school size...I don’t understand [why the curriculum and the teaching is not better]?

Another area that contributed to Erica’s negative experiences in Leonard is her belief that Leonard is narrow-minded in their vision of how children should behave and learn, “[There is a Leonard] formula [which is] if you [the students] don’t get it [the material] by the way I [the teacher] present it, then too bad.” Erica believes that each of her children fell outside the Leonard formula and that meant that they never thrived in its school system,

My oldest is very much like me...he's not a big sitter [or listener] [but] he always did ok, I don't think he ever really got a lot out of school...I mean he didn't have any behavioral problems...but those types of kids are not looked upon favorably. Erica's oldest daughter was "always completely under the radar, a pleaser, does her work. I don't think she learned a lot." Erica had severe problems with her younger daughter, who was diagnosed as dyslexic after many years of struggling in school,

I had a very difficult time for many years with her...we went through testing in school which was very difficult for her...she was having a lot of stress, especially in math...it was pretty brutal ...she was being ridiculed terribly in math...by the same teacher who had my son who...hated his guts...it was really brutal...she [her daughter] would break out in hives. [Once she moved out of her math class] she was a completely different kid.

Erica's current 8<sup>th</sup> grader is a sensitive boy who is troubled by the way the teachers treat his fellow students. She shares, "he doesn't like school. He's never had a teacher that he really liked...he finds a lot of the things that are said in school [by teachers to students] to be crazy."

Erica had the option of school choice with each of her children, but Erica does not believe in the specific state testing that JHS requires and opted out of having her children take the test,

My youngest wanted to go to [JHS]. I didn't have him [take the state test] because I don't like [the company that develops and distributes the test]. I don't like the tracking. I don't the political involvement.

This action disqualified her children from being able to apply to JHS. Erica views this as unfair, “ he wasn’t even able to get in the lottery [at JHS] because he did not [take the test]. I had no choice for him.” She thinks it’s wrong that her children need to take tests to go to another public school. Erica finds school choice programs ridiculous because JHS, “gets [both] state money and the opportunity to select the students they want” based upon their own criteria. In the interview she was pretty emotional about it. She says,

It’s a shame, [JHS is] skimming the cream [of Leonard students].... They’re picking the top test takers... They’re not trying to get everybody, they laser beam in on the kids that do well naturally. [JHS] does not want to take on [the] kids with learning differences.

Erica is attuned to learning differences since her daughter has had to manage her own disability, mentioned earlier in the chapter. She feels sure that the school choice programming is unfair and problematic to those children left in WTHS. In fact, Erica blames a lot of the troubles that she sees happening in WTHS on the school choice program, “The school [WTHS] has not been run well for ten years... I think a lot of the problem is this skimming that’s being done with school choice, with picking the top scorers...it creates an artificial result.” Erica has seen many of her peers take action in order to get their children into JHS. In her follow up interview she shared that she knew of families that, “hired tutors and did work after school with teachers...to try and get into [JHS] because that’s what people care about getting into.” Erica did not like this system. She felt this was “silly and peculiar” and that the Leonard district should be able to teach the students during the school day, “ [Hiring tutors is] foolish and inefficient since class sizes are so small this [school work] should be accomplished in school.” She dismisses

the efforts of the school and parents as trite since she does not believe JHS to be a school to strive for, nor does she like her other options, “ It's not like they're trying to get into Exeter [a very prestigious private school]...you're choosing between three mediocre schools, crappy, crappier, and total crap.” Erica is frustrated that she could not give her children what she felt were better choices. She expressed frustration over not being able to move from the area on multiple occasions in her interview and says,

[There] are lots of options that I feel would be better options for my kids...so I feel like a massive hypocrite because I am saying how much I can't stand it, but they're still there [in the area schools]...there's just been stuff that has happened life-wise over the years that has...we've just been in a holding pattern.

Erica is constrained by circumstance and cannot seem to find a way out of her current school district even if she is discontented.

Erica has had three children attend WTHS and she did not care for any of their experiences, “It's been very disappointing seeing my kids at [WTHS].” In speaking candidly about her children's experiences in attending an urban characteristic school she shares this,

There's a massive discrepancy in the socioeconomics up there [in Western Town].... so I don't think on either side...I love the diversity. I mean that's one of my biggest problems living here [in Leonard]...that's why I like taking my kids places to see that there's a whole world out there...but going up there [to WTHS]...you're not seeing other nationalities represented in the same light [as well] as you would in a [more economically diverse scenario].

Erica feels that a more economically diverse scenario would allow for stronger and more equal relationships between White students and students of color. This troubles her. She goes on to share that academic segregation is the real story at WTHS and that is how the Leonard families prefer it,

There is a narrative that ...with the diversity, [in WTHS] it's great, it's the real world. And it's not even kind of the real world. There is, also, [this attitude that] if you just ...get 'em [Leonard students] in the right classes, which I think is absolutely nonsense because you're basically segregating...people are basically saying, if we can just get our kids into the honors classes, we can segregate them from the other students...everybody stays together, the Black kids, the Spanish [sic] kids, the Asian...it's very segregated

Erica is sharing that academic tracks creates segregation within WTHS and that Leonard parents who send their children to WTHS do so if they can get them into honors classes, which remain racially segregated in Erica's experiences. However, Erica's daughter is not part of the advanced academic track at WTHS, and her experiences in the regular classrooms has alarmed Erica. She shared with her thoughts after becoming aware that her daughter's WTHS math class was without a teacher for six weeks. Her daughter was the only White student in that class,

I was the only parent that had called [the school]...I hate to assume the circumstances of the other kids but there are a lot of parents up there that are hustling multiple jobs...difficult living situation...it's just a different lifestyle.... They [WTHS] were completely unaware [of the missing math teacher]. I feel like it's important to say, but I feel like coming from me, it's going to sound,



possibly...misconstrued. But she [her daughter] was the only White child in the class. I think if it had been a classroom full of White kids from Leonard, parents would have been up in arms...It's just part of the problem...how these kids get passed on...

Erica's interview ended with her reflecting on what her youngest son's high school experience will look like. Currently, he is set to start his freshman year at WTHS but Erica holds out hope for the possibility of a move away from Leonard, "I've been trying to get my husband to move for twenty years so I've been hanging onto the hope that ..we would be moving." She also is considering, "homeschooling, [either] online homeschool [or an] unschooling approach", because her son would like that. Erica is unsure whether or not she can see homeschooling through. For her current 9<sup>th</sup> grade daughter she is seeking enrichment opportunities in the form of summer travel programs and "year abroad [high school programs]." While Erica laments her lack of choice, she does have the financial acumen to run a homeschool program for her son if she chooses and can send her daughter abroad.

**Kate.** Kate grew up in a large, diverse area nearby Leonard City. As a child, Kate was often left to her own devices and she credits this independence and her inner drive for helping her achieve professional success, "My parents were not really involved with my homework...they didn't come to my games. I just kind of did things on my own." Living in the more affluent community of Leonard introduced Kate to the idea of greater parental involvement, "the school system we're in [it's a] more affluent community [than where I grew up]...you have more parental involvement here." Kate tried to do things

differently than her parents by giving her children all that she could. Here she is reflective about that choice,

When I first started raising my kids one of the things I thought [was], You know what...I'm gonna be more involved with my kids than my parents were with me. I'm going to give my kids things that my parents weren't able to financially give me, all those things...there are a lot of positive things coming out of that...I thought I was doing them a favor... but also [it] goes back to the independence thing. I did everything by myself. My parents were not involved at all...they were not even involved in my applying to colleges. I wrote all my own [essays]. Now we're sending kids to professionals who are helping them do their college essays and applications. It's insane...it's like at some point it's not even the kid's work anymore...you know what I mean.

To Kate, her parental involvement came at a cost. Her children suffered due to their dependence on their parent's help and Kate has tried to make changes in her approach,

My husband and I are trying to backpedal a little but because I'm realizing that some of the things my parents...were right that...kids have to learn how to be able to do things on their own.

Kate had an underwhelming experience in the Leonard school district. She spends a lot of time detailing the ways she wishes Leonard were different, including their approaches to academics and the social landscape of students,

I would like to see more task-based report cards as opposed to an A or B in reading or math, like I want to know what can my kid do ...[and] they're not used to dealing with kids bigger problems...they don't know how to deal with different

individual behaviors as well as I'd like...something that is a behavior issue in [Leonard] would never be a behavior issue [in a nearby, large town].

Kate feels that Leonard students are expected to be one way, and while her daughter may have fit that mold, her current 8<sup>th</sup> grade son does not, "I've found my experience with my boys...the way they [Leonard] handle things...to be different ...my boys are more average..[but] when my daughter graduated I felt like we could've gotten more out of her."

Kate chose to send her daughter who, "always tested 99th percentile on her standardized tests," to WTHS in part because she hoped the urban environment would boost her daughter's confidence, which had stumbled in the small, insular environment of Leonard. "I was hoping that she would go to [WTHS] and feel like she could be anybody she wanted, almost like when you move to a big city." Kate also thought her daughter could have a competitive edge at WTHS since she was an excellent student and would be in the advanced track, "It isn't as competitive at WTHS so [my daughter] could take every AP course she liked...of course she was at the higher end of the kids going there". When I asked Kate if attending WTHS helped her daughter get into a better college Kate said "yeah."

One area of her interview where Kate spent a large amount of time was a discussion of her observations regarding her White daughter's experience in a largely Black and Hispanic school. Kate, as previously mentioned, had hoped for a blended, diverse experience for her daughter, but she did not have that,

I would ask her [daughter who] the groups of people that sit together in the lunchroom... that just shows you kind of if it doesn't happen when its young. You

had certain races just all sitting together. They were grouped together. They weren't...people weren't intermingling.

Kate believes the trouble her daughter had integrating was due to a lack of exposure to persons of color,

She [came] from a district [Leonard] that was very small [and] sheltered.

Everybody was kind of like her. I think my kids would have been totally different if they grew up in the city ...I don't think diversity would have ever even been...a thought. If she [Kate's daughter]...grew was raised differently from early on... I think a lot of these things [prejudices] happened early on...I think early childhood is probably very important as far as kid's views.

Furthermore, Kate believed that attending WTHS may have heightened what Kate felt were normal, subtle prejudices. Kate stumbled around this a bit because it was uncomfortable, but still she spent considerable time exploring this idea in her interview. I asked Kate if she thought her daughter was more prejudiced after attending WTHS and she replied,

I don't think my daughter would think that she's prejudiced in anyway...causes she's not really, she's young so she's like, 'Oh I'm not prejudiced', [but] by the time you get to the high school level, it's almost too late...she [her daughter] still had her, hate to say but everybody has their prejudices you know, everybody might on a subconscious level...I hate the fact that I feel that way, but with her [daughter] it's a lot worse because she grew up with no [interactions with persons of color], totally sheltered. I feel like our community [Leonard] and I didn't do the greatest job of...taking her places and making it so she wasn't sheltered.

While Kate's daughter eventually made "friends from different groups because she was on sports," these friendships were not her close, intimate friendships, "when it came to her lunch table, her lunch table was basically mostly [Leonard] and [Walden] kids...most of the kids that came to our house...were White middle class kids." In her follow up interview Kate was very concerned about how her comments regarding prejudice would be perceived. She was worried about her daughter may be viewed poorly for feelings that are unfair to pin on her and explained, "If I go through areas that are high crime I am afraid. Those areas that happen to be low income are minorities...I have more concern with over privileged kids, over privileged can be more damaging." In her follow up comments Kate is seeking to show that one is not prejudiced for being afraid in high crime areas that just happen to be low income and populated with persons of color.

Presently, Kate has chosen JHS for her current 8<sup>th</sup> grader, a son. There are a variety of reasons for this different choice including Kate's belief that the connection between the Leonard and WTHS communities have declined due to the expansion of school choice. Of this she says,

At the time [my daughter went to WTHS] I felt that's where the kids originally from [Leonard and Walden] went. They went to [WTHS]... until this school choice program. I felt [at the time] like [we] were more connected to Western Town than we were to Jewel.

Kate perceived a decline at WTHS over the course of her daughter's time there due to the expansion of school choice, which she blames for the loss of resources at WTHS when Leonard students leave. She says,

I saw the issues at [WTHS] and each year they seemed to get worse with the school choice unfortunately [taking a lot of the prize students]. [JHS] is taking the funding from [WTHS]. [JHS] now gets that. I saw [WTHS] didn't have a lot of the same resources that [JHS] did. I saw [a decline] in the four years. You want a school that's on the cutting edge...[and] I understand why [WTHS is not]...they don't have the funding...when they lose kids they lose that money...[JHS] is getting our money instead of [WTHS]

Not only does Kate see the resources WTHS is losing, but she also believes it is unfair that JHS gets the top students from Leonard. Like Erica, she sees a flaw in the system,

I don't know how [JHS] gets away with this but they do (laughs). They're able to take the kid, you know you have to get certain [standardized test] scores; they're taking the higher end kids. They're not taking kids that have, you know, that have issues, like behavior issues or academic issues

Clearly, Kate is not inclined to choose a high school that she views as on the decline, and not cutting edge. Nor does she want to send her son to a school where there could be more behavior or academic issues. Furthermore, the gender of her son was a major factor in her high school choice as Kate discussed her fears for him if he attended WTHS,

I think he [my son] needed the positive role models [he could not get at WTHS]. You know, 'cause he's a boy...like he's looking, he's listening to rap. I'm not a priss...I love Red Hot Chili Peppers...but some of the things that the kids are listening to is just, the lyrics are horrible. At [JHS] he'll see less of the kids

getting in serious trouble...[which could be appealing to him]...My daughter always was more level headed than my boys. My boys are so immature.

Kate is afraid her son could get into serious trouble at WTHS. When I asked Kate if her son, would have a more difficult time getting into a good college at JHS, she is unsure. “Who knows. I mean for him I wanted, I think he needed the positive role models.” Kate prioritized better role models for her son in choosing JHS. In Kate’s follow up interview I asked her if gender shaped her opinions regarding high school choices. Kate says she is not sure its gender. Rather, her son’s “level of maturity meant he’s not ready to live in a city. [His] friends and activities were factors too. He could leave school and have lunch, he could walk to lunch, walk to [a family members] house and help out with their local business.” Overall, Kate does not believe she is sacrificing her son’s academics. In JHS he will have access to “higher-level courses that’ll challenge him...[and] there are good teachers at both schools” while providing him with a safe and positive social environment to keep him out of the trouble he could encounter in WTHS.

**Randy.** After several traumatic moves in her early childhood Randy settled in Walden City, an adjoining town to Leonard. Moving as a child was difficult for Randy and she still remembers her terrible experience in an urban elementary public school,

We uprooted [from the state she had been living in with her mother and sister] kind of last minute and landed [on my aunt’s] doorstep. She put us in the first public school across from our house...it was a culture shock going from this little school to this big, huge urban school in the city...it was horrible.

This negative, urban schooling experience still upset Randy when she shared it with me all these years later. The following year, Randy's aunt decided to move her, her mother, and her sister to the small home she owned in Walden. There, Randy attended the public school and was happy through 8th grade. She began high school at the local Catholic school because "everybody my year seemed to go to [that school], all of my friends, everybody went." Randy, who "didn't grow up Catholic" found it, "tough, socially it was a tough situation." She transferred to WTHS after her freshman where her remaining high school years were positive. Randy married another WTHS graduate and their eldest daughter will be attending WTHS in the fall.

Randy's daughter had initially wanted to attend JHS and Randy did everything in her power to help her daughter reach her goal. First, she dropped her daughter's honor math class in middle school because she was in danger of getting a C and, "if you get a C you can not apply to [JHS]." Randy also, "asked for a study hall in [Leonard], which a lot of people don't know you can do...so that [her daughter] can get her work done during school hours [and focus on her sports after school]." Yet, Randy's daughter's number was not picked in the JHS lottery and she is unlikely to be pulled from the waitlist. This experience has left her daughter with negative feelings towards JHS, "she feels rejected right now". This rejection seems to have strengthened her daughter's resolve to attend WTHS "she [insists] won't go [to JHS] because she wants to start her sport over the summer."

Randy is an alumna of WTHS and she is candid in her feelings about her daughter being a student there. She sees it as a way for her daughter to stay out of trouble and on a good path because while she attended WTHS Randy experienced few



opportunities to socially interact with students who were not from Leonard or of similar backgrounds. Here she shares her experiences,

[Attending WTHS] kept us out of trouble because we did not have any of those social experiences that other high schools did...we still had our core group of friends [from Leonard or Walden]...we just didn't have it with the masses. You didn't really branch out, or make a lot of new friends because you didn't have those social settings to do it in.

Randy's experience was to socialize with Leonard and Walden students and not mix with the masses. She did not elaborate on whom the masses were.

While Randy is not overly concerned about her daughter's safety more than any other high school as a graduate of WTHS, she is realistic about what her daughter will experience when she enters WTHS from Leonard schools. She has spent time preparing her daughter for life at WTHS, "I don't want her to feel scared but I did sit her down and tell her, don't go to the bathroom by yourself...there's things that when you go to [WTHS] you have to know, life skills." Randy believes her daughter will need to be protective of her personal safety but she elaborates that while, "safety is definitely a concern...in the world we're in it's a concern in all the high schools...cause it really can happen anywhere." Randy is alluding to gun violence that can breakout in any high school and thus decreases her fear regarding WTHS because there, "everyone walks through a metal detector."

Randy also believes that attending WTHS will open her daughter's eyes to the privileges she has and Randy thinks that will be valuable for her daughter,

We live in a little bubble here...and sometimes our kids...we try to make them, I think sometimes they get (laughs)... streamlined... everybody here even though we have different economics and things in Leonard...I feel like [my daughter [thinks] everybody's on the same playing field...[that] everybody [if they need it] just buys it, ...everybody just buys \$50 T-shirts [for their kids for school recitals]...and not one person complains...but if you were in another school, in another town that's not the case. They're not all just able to do those things...I think her seeing...kind of the struggles that other families have would be, is good.

Furthermore there are a variety of ways Randy's daughter can personally benefit from attending WTHS. Here she explains the benefits WTHS offers her daughter,

Sports are completely funded by the school...they pay for your cleats, your lacrosse stick. You show up the first day and you get all brand new gear. And they have a late bus to take sports kids home...even driver's education is paid for...it's \$350 at [JHS]!

Randy also shares that daughter is planning to play golf,

Even the golf, this is why she's signed up for golf. She's never played golf before. It's an expensive sport to buy her clubs..and she gets an entire set of clubs, cleats, on the first day of golf..she's opening up her eyes to play a new sport...because finances aren't coming into play. Even though she's not worried, ever, about finances..but if she came to me [to play golf].. and said...I need \$1000 for golf clubs...I would say stick with field hockey. We already have a stick...it definitely helps a little bit.

Randy also explains, “everything’s paid for, even your registration to college, your application fees are waived at [WTHS] because you're coming from an inner city school.” Her daughter will not have a financial constraint on how many colleges she applies to. None of these additional benefits of WTHS that are mentioned by other participating mothers so it is unclear whether they are aware of them or not. However, Randy is well aware of the resources that she can access for her daughter when she attends WTHS in the fall.

Randy also believes that her daughter’s chances of attending an elite university and/or getting a college scholarship improves if she attends WTHS. Here, Randy recounts the open house she attended at WTHS,

We were in the auditorium and they listed the colleges the kids from [WTHS] go to and half of them were, more than half were Ivy League. More than half of them got full scholarships...academic scholarships, sports scholarships. I didn't hear one student at [JHS] that even got into an Ivy League...I am sure it happens but I didn't hear about it.

Since Randy’s daughter is a great student and a good athlete Randy believes her daughter stands to benefit from less competition at WTHS and end up at the top of the class.

Below are her thoughts about this,

She would kind of be the cream of the crop there [at WTHS], without sounding like (laughs) horrible. She's a really good student. She would be in all honors classes and she would play every sport she wants to. So, it's kind of like, why wouldn't she go there?

Still, Randy would not keep her daughter at WTHS if she were unhappy there. She expressed her exit plan if her daughter is not happy at WTHS, “if she is crying to me every day that she hates it there...we’ll figure out a plan B in order to figure out a high school [that works for her].” Randy will not force her daughter to stay in school she is not happy in, and she will find a way to make shifts for her much like her mother allowed Randy to do.

Finally, I ask Randy, a longtime local resident, if she thinks high school choice has been good for the area. Randy has given a lot of thought to this topic but has yet to reach a conclusive answer,

I go back and forth because I do think that it [school choice] helps our area. I think when people move here the first thing they say is that I don’t want to live in [Leonard] because I don't want my kids to go to [WTHS]. So, school choice gives parents an option, [that I] can live in [Leonard] and send my kids to [JHS].

Randy’s biggest concern with school choice seems to be that there are fewer chances for Leonard students to get into JHS since competition has it has increased over the years. She explains,

It [used to be] a lot easier in the past to get in... [it used to be] everybody that applied [from Leonard] got in. Now the word is out so it’s harder for the [Leonard] kids because there are more kids in the lottery.

**Amanda.** Amanda grew up in a nice town that bordered a very wealthy town. In fifth grade her local public school consolidated with the adjoining wealthier district and

Amanda left her old school behind to attend the wealthier one. Below she describes that experience,

I could tell the difference [between the two schools], it just seemed like the teachers were more concerned, the projects were a little harder...at the time I didn't know what blue collar meant, but [that is what my old school was]...[the new school wasn't] as simplified as the children, parents, and teachers [in her old school were]. [The new school] was ritz and glitzy...we had field trips and [did] philanthropy...I just remember [my old school] being very basic, like white bread.

Amanda recalls that her parents mainly relied on her to be self-motivated in school, “both of my parents worked...and they never tried to bribe me to get straight A’s... although one time I remember getting straight A’s and they got me a Schwinn bike.” Amanda described herself as a “mediocre talent” in school, “I was not a great student, I wasn’t a bad student but I wasn’t honors, I was not academic at all.” Amanda attributes her experience to the high school’s lack of engaging curriculum, “nothing stimulated me in high school...it was just boring, you read the classics, you [did] worksheets and there was nothing intriguing about any of the work that [I’d] done.” Amanda shared, “that’s why I felt like I hated high school. I had really nothing to hate...I was in the popular crew but it [high school] just didn’t do anything for me.”

In contrast, Amanda’s college experience was exceptional. She went to, “A private college [that] was a fortune at the time,” which provided her with academic stimulation, “It was the first time I was engaged ever scholastically.” She further states, “My...professor my freshman year introduced me to ..who I am today.” Amanda is

regretful that it took so long for her to become academically enriched and blames the high school she had attended for their lack of inspiration. Part of the reason that Amanda was attracted to JHS for her daughter was that during their open house she became excited about their academic curriculum, “Students [design projects about a problem they see], and they work towards creating a solution for [it].” This scholastic approach gave Amanda hope that perhaps her daughter could enjoy academics in high school. She says of her daughter currently, “She does well...but she’s not inspired by much..[but] I don’t push them. My parents never pushed me...”

Initially, Amanda’s daughter was going to attend WTHS but she was not thrilled with this choice because her daughter did not have a good reaction to the school. Here she explains their visit, “my daughter took one look at [WTHS] and said, ‘I’m not going here’.” However, Amanda did not think her daughter would have the option of JHS so she worked hard to get her daughter to a place of peace about attending WTHS,

We didn’t think she was going to get into [JHS]. [So] we were like, you need to be okay with [WTHS]. You need to be okay with it. I think you’re gonna do great [there]. And we kept getting that in her head. And [she became] fine with that.

The only other option Amanda felt she had would be to move out of Leonard and she did not want to move because her other children, sons, “love [Leonard]. They love it. I can’t pull them away from [Leonard].” This contrast has been difficult for Amanda to manage. She says that, “[Leonard] is a great place for her boys [but a] horrible place for girls.” Her daughter had a difficult time connecting with students in Leonard, “[because] there’s no other kids that are similar to [her here] and that’s tough...that has nothing to do with...[academics] but...it’s what’s also made her experience really rough.”

Furthermore, Amanda has a difficult time with the middle school because she did not like the way the teachers handled her daughter, “The teachers there...[insulted her daughter] in front of the entire [class].” Her daughter also, “had a definite rough time [in middle school]...she’s set back because there was some [social] trauma in there.” This trauma affected her daughter’s middle school grades significantly and the result of these poor grades meant that if Amanda’s daughter attended WTHS she would not be in the advanced track. Being in general education classes means that Amanda’s daughter would be with mainly students from Western Town and not Leonard students. Amanda shares her fears regarding this,

I don’t think she would have been placed in advanced placement classes [in WTHS]. I felt like she’s gonna be placed in a class where there might be, you know, kids that might intimidate her...[and] she clearly does not do well when her emotions get [involved]...her grades really suffered [in Leonard middle school] when she had that whole bullying episode.

Amanda believes her daughter’s grades would suffer in WTHS because she would be intimidated by the students in the regular classes in WTHS. In her follow-up interview Amanda shared that she would have been more open to sending her daughter to WTHS if she were an honors student, “I would have only sent her to [WTHS] if she were an honors student and she would [go] to a great college. I feel like if she did well in [WTHS] she would have way more [college] choices.” I learned from Amanda that honors classes were held in separate wings from regular classes and that could help her daughter feel safe, “The honors [classes] are in a different wing [so] I didn’t want to take the chance [of sending her daughter into the general coursework].” Since her daughter

could not take advantage of these advanced courses Amanda was less inclined to send her daughter to WTHS.

Over the winter holiday vacation her daughter unexpectedly got picked in the JHS lottery. Amanda decided to let her enroll because her daughter would feel safe at JHS and thus, her grades would stay steady. Here she shares her thinking of her daughter becoming a student at JHS versus attending WTHS,

My reasoning [for JHS] was, of course, I felt like she's gonna be in a better learning environment if she feels safer...she was in such a vulnerable place in the past six months and how could I throw her to the wolves when I know deep down that she's terrified of [WTHS]?"

Amanda knew her daughter was terrified of attending WTHS and its student population whom she refers to as, "wolves". Still, Amanda has strong reservations about her daughter attending JHS too, particularly about its social experience. Here Amanda compares JHS to Leonard, a place where her daughter already has social issues,

You're living in this bubble in [Leonard], but I think socially it's going to be hard for her in [JHS] [because] it's just a bigger bubble...[JHS] is more of the same...and I'm very scared for her there...

While Amanda's daughter is, "terrified of the multicultural aspect of [WTHS]," Amanda is, "terrified of the lack of it [diversity] in [JHS]."

Still, Amanda has prioritized an easy adjustment to high school life over any future benefits that attending a diverse high school could yield for her daughter,

[I believe] by junior year [at WTHS] she would have so many friends who would be diverse...I think that would be really important. But I think freshman year she



would struggle...[and] I [have] to get her to feel safe. so that [she] can...get into a good college.

Again, the priority for Amanda her daughter's future grades. She will not sacrifice those years which would affect her daughter's college options for diversity's sake.

Amanda's other children and their gender are again important factors for why Amanda chose JHS for her daughter. JHS has sibling status in their admissions, which means that siblings are automatically given a spot if they meet JHS criteria. Her daughter's status at JHS means that her siblings will have an easier time getting into JHS. And, Amanda is clear that she does not want her sons going to WTHS. Here she describes why,

I want my boys to go to [JHS] because I'm terrified of them going to [WTHS]. I think they would be so shy and so afraid. In [Leonard] they are so happy...and I think that they would really shrivel up in [WTHS]...they would be so scared because they're used to riding their bikes around town...and being free, and leaving their phones at the field and nothing happens...they're so naive, and innocent. I think it would be a rude awakening...not that they won't have [a rude awakening at JHS], but it's one they can handle.

Amanda is afraid for her boys in WTHS. She thinks that their innocence and happiness would be taken from them if they attended that school.

Our interview finishes with my asking Amanda her thoughts on school choice in the area. Amanda likes the idea that her children can choose a new high school, "because after eight years with the same families everybody's kid...needs to get out of [Leonard]." However, she does feel somewhat constrained by the lack of choices in the area,

We were going to move, but decided not to because my sons are so happy here. I [don't] think there are many options here scholastically. I mean there is no private school [that I would choose to send my children to].

In the end, Amanda was pleased with the way things turned out. She does like JHS and her daughter's attendance there will make it easier for her sons to get in when they are of age.

**Hope.** Hope grew up out of state from Leonard. She moved schools quite a bit as a child but went with the flow wherever she was, "My parents kind of scooped around a little bit...I started in public school...[then] private school...then another private school." Her mother left Hope in a high school where she felt she had the best options for a sports scholarship since her grades were not that strong, "My mom was like, 'you're not gonna get into college if you don't have your sports...so we gotta...[keep you in a certain high school]'". Early on in our interview Hope abashedly shared that she was raised in a family that had explicit prejudices towards people of color and how that shaped her early experiences and future belief systems.

I was raised in... a prejudiced manner. I was strongly discouraged from hanging out with people who were not White, even if the person in the neighborhood, the only family that moved in that were of color, you know, I was not allowed to hang out with them.....I think it shaped my entire future.

Her family's racism was difficult for Hope to accept, "I could never really wrap my brain around it [her father's prejudices]...I always questioned it." Her eventual rejection of his belief system led, in part, to her career working with at risk youth, often

students of color. Hope, through her work, shared that her father has changed his prejudiced beliefs. Here she shares her story,

I was a single mom with two kids and he [my dad] would always come [to my job to help me.]...over the years he's seen really positive things come from me being with other races... I think he has had experience where he's seen different races in a different light...who he was growing up in our house and what it looked like and who he is now...they couldn't be more polar opposite.

Hope moved to Leonard several years ago to live with her partner, a supporter of WTHS. His children all attended WTHS and were accepted into prominent universities. Hope's oldest child attends WTHS and is having a positive experience there. Hope's son, a current eighth grader son will attend WTHS. They have not considered JHS. Here she shares, "I am not all that familiar with [JHS] because it was never a considered option for us...we moved [to Leonard from a nearby town]...specifically for [my daughter] to go to [WTHS]"

Hope has had a positive experience with the Leonard schools. While Hope seems to enjoy living in Leonard and has many friends here she does have strong opinions about the high school choices Leonard families make for their kids.

Our small town here [is] all affluent and for the most part 100% White. The kids from K-8 have very little experience with any kind of diversity and I think the majority of parents fear sending their child to [WTHS] just based on stories they've heard, rumors they've heard, what they think, and I think race plays a huge part, personally.

Here she expounds upon her beliefs and gives insight into her specific conversations regarding high school choice in the town of Leonard,

It's definitely a strong conversation here specifically to our town because of our sending district...most people are using choice because they don't want their child to go to [WTHS]...There's always this conversation but when it comes down to it everybody always has their reasons why there are trying not to send to our sending district [WTHS] but I find most of the time that those reasons are not entirely valid, I think.

Hope believes the reason that Leonard families avoid WTHS is, “because they don’t want their children to go to school with Black people.” Here she elaborates,

Our sending district is...majority African-American... [it is] predominantly because of race... I would say [that race is] the reason why [Leonard families don’t choose WTHS].

When I asked Hope if she believed the socio economic disparities at WTHS affected the school choices of Leonard parents she replied,

If [WTHS ] was White I genuinely think they [Leonard families] would just go to [WTHS]. There wouldn’t be [this scramble] to do everything [you] can get into [JHS]...I don’t think it has anything to do with socioeconomics, I think it has everything to do with, um, their child being around a certain element [Black people].

Hope also shares that Leonard families point to the academics at WTHS as why they do not choose it, “ we have a lot of friends who have said, ‘We don’t mind the, going to school with Black people...we’re just really worried about academics.’” Hope

goes on to share her family ritual which, to her, invalidates the idea that academics are weak at WTHS,

We used to do a thing in [our] household where we would cut out the top graduates [from the newspaper] of all the graduating classes in [our] county. The criteria is Ivy League or one of the military academies, MIT... very exclusive criteria. [Western Town High School for] 15 straight years graduated the most students going to these schools.

This ritual is meant to make clear the academic advantages of attending WTHS. It is also clear from the above quote that that entrance into an elite university is a major reason why WTHS is considered attractive in Hope's family. Until our interview Hope did not consider whom the beneficiaries of these Ivy League educations were. I asked Hope if any of the top students at WTHS were African American or students of color. She answers,

That's a good question...there have been along the way... there have also been a lot of Asian...um and Spanish [sic]...I think number three [one year] was Spanish [sic]...but you bring up a good point...if all the top graduates are all White what's the point?

Hope seemed surprised by this line of questioning and that is revealed when she does acknowledge that students of color, who make up over 90% of the demographic, rarely graduate at the top of their class, "If all the top graduates are White, what's the point?"

Hope wants WTHS to continue to have strong academic programs and she is concerned about the ways that resources are diverted from WTHS when Leonard families

leave due to school choice. She shares, “the White middle class money is what pushes the academics in [WTHS]...if they go away those academics are going to go away too.”

Hope’s statement tacitly acknowledges that the beneficiaries of the strong academics are White middle class students. She also acknowledges that without strong academics she be less inclined to send her children to WTHS, regardless of the diversity. Here she shares,

The phenomenon of [WTHS] is that they have the academic programs and they have the strong things there because I thought, “would [I] send [my son] to [an area school] that’s very diverse [but has poor academics]?”...you know am I talking out of both sides of my mouth because, I probably wouldn’t send my son to [such a school].”

While diversity is important to Hope she is clear that it is only a part of the experience she wants to give to her children. It is not a factor which trumps her children’s academic and professional futures.

**Parker.** Parker is a JHS employee and was concerned about the possible ramifications of our interview due to this status. Her interview was the shortest in length. Parker grew-up in a town nearby Leonard where she could walk to her elementary school, which she described as warm and nurturing, “the teachers really cared about you, and they were really personable.” Parker’s high school was much larger but her experience was similar in nature, “that was a great experience...I would say you went with kids you had grown up with and you knew... it was small enough where you knew most of the kids there.” Parker enjoyed playing sports and. “just hanging out with my friends. I remember senior year just having a bit more freedom to take these electives and do fun things.” Parker seemed to enjoy all parts of her educational experience.

Parker describes her experience with the Leonard schools system as positive too, "We've had a great experience here...I like that it is so small and the class sizes are...about 12 [to] 14 [students]. That individualized attention you can't beat...it's an intangible that you just can't really replicate with bigger districts."

Parker also appreciates that her son "can't get away with slacking without someone noticing. My son has no room to... fall through the cracks ...he can't get away with it, you know (laughs)." Parker appreciates that the school is small and intimate and her son has flourished in this intimate setting. He, "is a very good student and a hard worker...we got him in a routine where he comes home, gets a snack, sits down, and does his homework." Sometimes Parker is concerned about her son's worries, "He'll worry, so he tries to overcompensate for that by just working a little harder or just studying a little more."

Parker's son was accepted into more than one local choice school through the lottery system, and her final high school choice is reflective of her desire for an intimate high school experience for her son,

"I thought... and my husband and I talked extensively over it. I thought [JHS] would be a good fit for him because it was not huge...[WTHS] would have been too big for him because he is used to such a small environment."

She and her husband chose JHS for her son to attend, "because I thought the school [was] a good match for him. I felt they offered enough activities...where he would find his niche and be happy." She and her spouse also considered the area Catholic school because, "they have a strong academic program...and a very small intimate environment like he's in now." They did not consider WTHS at all but Parker says if her

son insisted on going there she would have, “if that was really...what he wanted and was gonna make him happy then we probably would have [considered WTHS].”

Parker’s overriding priority for her son is his happiness and to her happiness depends on a low stress level. She mentions this several times in the course of the interview in regards to school work being too stressful and neither does she want his professional choices to cause him stress. She says,

My concerns are that because he’s a smart kid and we want him to do well...I hope he’s not too overwhelmed with the honors level classes. I would say his wellbeing and happiness [are my priorities for him]...I don’t want him to be too overwhelmed and stressed...I want him to work hard to reach his potential...[college] is a goal but not a priority...If he says “I want to go into a carpenters union”, why would I stop him from doing that? I think maybe he says things and doesn’t realize how big that career path could be...he’s said, “I want to be a doctor”...and it’s a lot of schooling.

Convenience was also a larger factor when Parker considered her son’s high school. Here she explains why she did not choose a local prep school with an excellent academic reputation,

It was just so far away from us...if he was gonna play a sport...we would have [gone] out there every day to go get him...that was just a little bit inconvenient...the convenience of JHS [was a major factor of our choice].

Parker’s son wanted to go to JHS, and they went to the open house and well as the local Catholic schools. That local Catholic School would have been the second choice. And, when I asked about siblings, Parker did mention her younger daughter saying, “the



siblings do get a preference.” Parker was aware that her son’s student status at JHS would help her daughter’s admittance in the future.

The only thing that Parker mentioned about diversity and high school choice was that JHS, “gave her son a chance to meet other kids from other areas as well as get a summer job [more easily].” Finally, when I asked Parker about the effects of school choice on her community she replied,

I don’t know if there’s been a negative effect because [if kids don’t get into JHS] they go to [WTHS] and the kids do awesome and they love it...parents just have to make that choice for their child. And every child’s different. So, they have to see what's gonna be the best match and fit for their child... [In terms of school choices] positive effects [on the community] ...maybe parents have a little more say in their child’s education ...we had some good choices, so it worked out.

Parker had only positive opinions regarding school choice program and the ways that it affected her family and community.

**Rebecca.** Rebecca grew up in a small town far away from Leonard where “you went to school in your town.” She had a positive schooling experience and recalls,

I think I had a positive education in a smaller school...it never felt like I would have liked to go anywhere else but I also at that time wouldn’t have thought to ask for anything else...I know my graduating class in high school had 100 kids in it...I do feel like I was adequately prepared for college.

Rebecca can relate to her daughter’s experiences of small town life in Leonard because of her own small town upbringing, “I grew up in a small town and now we live in a small town so I think it’s very similar. I can relate to that for my kids.” Her daughter

will attend WTHS in the fall and that experience will differ from Rebecca's whose high school was around 400 students while WTHS, "is huge [and] has around two thousand kids...[a] big difference [from my experience]."

Rebecca's mother was adamant that her children attend college out of state because she wanted them to see the bigger world, "I grew up in a very White town...she [my mother] was adamant that we were going to go to school somewhere else." Rebecca and her siblings all attended out-of-state colleges. For Rebecca, the experience was formative and continues to shape her today, "I met really great people...that looked a lot different from the people I grew up with...[it was] so eye opening and so much more of a cultural real life experience." Rebecca wants her daughter to have these eye-opening experiences too,

I want that for my kid. I want my kids to leave high school prepared for college, to be comfortable in who they are and around lots of other people...to be able to...interview or have conversations with people or meet new people and not feel totally at a loss or uncomfortable.

However, Rebecca's daughter is not as sure that WTHS is where she wants to go. Rebecca's daughter seems to prefer JHS and Rebecca sought to understand why. Here she explains her daughter's rationale,

[We] asked why do you want to go [to JHS]...she shared some of her reasons...then we said to her well what if all the people you know...we said some key names...decided to go to [WTHS]...what would you do...and she's like, I'd probably go to [WTHS].I said, well you shouldn't be basing your education just on where your friends are... I think it's important that [my daughter] [who's] had

a best friend since kindergarten and I think that can be great but...be your own person...don't make your decisions based on your friend...I just feel like her desires seem a little shallow to me at the moment ... I'm trying to be open minded...but I'll feel disappointed for her if she ends up going to [JHS] just because I don't feel like she just needs to follow the crowd that wants to go there. I just don't know that she...needs to go there [to JHS].

Rebecca found her daughter's desires to attend JHS to be based on where her friend went to be the wrong reason to choose a school. Rebecca also acknowledged the physical appeal of JHS to her 13 year old "it's beautiful, they have this gorgeous turf field, its clean and sparkly...if you're 13 [that is very appealing]" But she is able to distance herself from this comfort and sees it more as possibly stunting her daughter's personal daughter's growth. She wants that growth to include diverse experiences and below she shares her concerns with her daughter attending JHS,

My concern, to be blunt, it's I think it's [JHS] a very White school...[but] I do think [my] 13 year old would go where her friends go...now fast forward to [her as an] 18 year old looking back she might [regret that choice]. I just feel like there's so many opportunities [in a diverse community]. I do feel like looking back I missed out on a lot of things that I wouldn't have even known about growing up. When I was growing up I didn't miss them cause I didn't know any different.

Rebecca believes she missed out on important experiences by attending such a small, White high school. She expands upon wanting something different for her

daughter in the hopes it will offer a chance for her to grow into a more fully developed person,

I did grow up very sheltered...I have been okay with that...I feel like I've made some life decisions that have opened more doors for me instead of closing me off...I feel like at [WTHS], it is a big school and they just offer so much...I just want that [for her]. I want her to have a lot of opportunities...this is their chance to really figure out who they want to be and what they wanna do. And, I feel like if you don't give yourself a chance to try different experiences you're short changing yourself.

While Rebecca is keen for her daughter to have a diverse high school experience she did grow up in an all-White town. I asked Rebecca how she thinks her daughter will fare in WTHS and navigate the different cultures there. First Rebecca shared the circumstances that led to her raising her family in a virtually all White town,

We were actually looking for properties in [Walden] is more diverse...but got a great deal on a house in [Leonard]...were we thinking we're moving into a very White town? I don't know that we were even thinking about that at the time [we had young toddlers then]...but then they started their elementary education kinda like I did, in a small [classroom] [and you] can't really get upset when you're a mom and there's 15 kids in a class and one teacher. That's pretty awesome.

Sometimes I feel like I'm a bit of a hypocrite saying I want her to go to [WTHS] when she could say to me, but you chose for us to live in [Leonard] so that's interesting.

Rebecca's perspective is that she happened to be part of an all-White community through circumstances and she acknowledges the hypocrisy of now wanting her daughter to attend a school that is quite the opposite of her formative experience, WTHS. I asked Rebecca how her daughter's limited exposure to persons of color would prepare her to build relationships with students of color at WTHS. Something that distinguished Rebecca's children from other interview subjects is that her daughters have had exposure to diversity through their extracurricular activities. While Rebecca concedes these choices were made for the quality of the programs and not for racial exposure, her parental decision to seek extracurricular activities outside of Leonard provided sustained, positive relationships with African American children,

Her swim program is actually in [a mainly African American nearby town]...and a lot of those kids will go to [WTHS] which is one of my points to her. My girls [also] dance at [a studio outside of town]. There is [a dance studio in town] but we made a choice to go [outside of town].

Furthermore, Rebecca's daughter has been well exposed to and is comfortable in the halls of WTHS, "All growing up she's been to a number of things at [WTHS we have attended]...plays and sporting events...she knows her way around." These experiences leave Rebecca believing her daughter can succeed at WTHS, "I think [she] would do well [there]." While she does acknowledge that it will be hard for her daughter to leave behind the comfort of her small school and life in Leonard, Rebecca hopes that the personal connections she has provided for her daughter will ease her transition,

I [work] in a very diverse [environment] [so] I have the luxury of knowing how it is. The halls and lunchroom will be challenging at first. [My daughter] is

confident, knows upperclassmen, and I will encourage her to seek out [those] people. And, our personal connection [to the school] will provide comfort for her.

While Rebecca's choice for her daughter is WTHS, she did allow her daughter to participate in the JHS lottery because as a parent she felt her daughter, whom, "had always been a great kid" earned the right to participate in her educational choice. Rebecca said, "it's going to work out the way it's supposed to work out," and her daughter's high lottery number makes it unlikely she will be pulled from the JHS waitlist before her freshman year. Thus, Rebecca's daughter is set to attend WTHS in the fall, "right now it's playing out beautifully the way I wanted it too."

Although Rebecca is heavily invested in sending her daughter to WTHS she would be reluctant to send her child to WTHS if she was not in the advanced academic track,

If my daughter was on the lower level academically I might not consider [WTHS] because I do know from where I work that your smarter kids approach the classroom in a serious manner. Your lower kids...are so frustrated with learning that they're just problematic. If you're kids gonna be in AP classes, in the higher classes then there's probably a very different dynamic between those [classes]. If you have a kid that's in a lower grade that would be a red flag for me. I would be more concerned about [her going to WTHS].

Other factors that might have swayed Rebecca's decision to send her daughter to WTHS include the geography of the school. Here she describes the location of the school and why its location provides her peace of mind,

[WTHS] is in a weird location...so yes there are gangs and there are kids that are involved in gangs that attend [WTHS]...if that high school were on the streets of [Western Town] I'd be a little more concerned because...I think there's just more accessibility...it could be more of a dangerous situation...[but] where the high school is, you're not on a street corner waiting for a bus...it's just very separated from the rest of the city.

Both the academic experience and safety of her daughter are items that Rebecca is not willing to sacrifice for the diverse experiences WTHS could offer her daughter.

Finally, I asked Rebecca to share her opinions regarding school choice programming in her community. She has both first-hand knowledge in her own professional arena as well as a view of how it has affected her community of Leonard. Below she describes her professional experiences,

I have seen the effects from being in a school system, how with kids start going all these other places then...our programs start shrinking because we just don't have the number of kids for certain things...it can change the dynamic of your school as certain groups of people decide they're not going..

In terms of her personal experiences in Leonard Rebecca shares,

I am always asking why does everybody want to do that? What's the reason for [wanting JHS]? And I think..as a parent we want what's best for our kids. We want them to have the best education and be comfortable because they have to do it. You have to get an education...so I do like that now we've evolved to where you can have choices, but I do think there's consequences for the choices. It's funny. People around here [Leonard] say that if everybody would just agree to go

[to WTHS] then everybody would go and then the sports programs would stay...we have these athletes that are looking for these competitive sports...so they decide to go other places. But if they all just went together they would boost up sports as they go...you know it's when the key people start leaving that you get lesser programs and offerings of extracurricular activities of whatever it is that people are looking for.

Rebecca questions why people want to leave WTHS and her answer is that people want their children to be comfortable in their education. This desire for comfort makes JHS appealing to families in Leonard but their choices directly affect the programming in WTHS.

**Amelia.** Amelia grew up in an affluent town not in Leonard. Her parents sent her to prep high school because she was not happy at the public high school,

I was privileged enough to be offered [prep school], which I know most people [even] I could never afford to send my children to prep school in a million years. I realize what a privilege that was for me,.

Amelia enjoyed her experience immensely, “when I went to the prep school...nobody was nasty to each other. Everybody...was allowed to be their own person.” Amelia’s private school offered a social flexibility that she enjoyed, “We could walk up to the center [of town] and get lunch. I could...go get money from [my parents] and go...I liked to socialize.” Amelia did well at her prep school. Her younger sister was forced to attend the same prep school because she “was hanging with the riff raff at the [public] high school...she was always getting into trouble and hanging out with the wrong kids.” The result for her sister was mixed,



[My parents were] really happy with the people she connected with at [the prep] school. But for her [sister] she just wanted to be with her, like, small town folks.

That [was the] people she hung out with.

Amelia's parents clearly had strong reactions about the social group of her sister and sought to control it through their school choices.

Amelia had a mainly positive experiences in the Leonard schools, particularly for her son who formed an early group of friends that he has kept all the way through 8th grade,

Both my kids got the opportunity to [go to the free Leonard preschool]...again, I guess just luck to go to this preschool, which I loved...and [my son] is still with a lot of the kids he met in three year old preschool...it [Leonard Schools] has been a good experience for him.

While Amelia lamented some of its smallness, "My street...it's a little bit of a fishbowl...[and] you do get caught up in the small town stuff," overall, her children have thrived in Leonard. Some challenges like "girl drama" seemed more heightened in Leonard due to its insular and "exclusionary" nature. Amelia witnessed her daughter being targeted, although she felt her daughter handled the drama maturely. Amelia also noticed that Leonard mothers can heighten the girl drama,

I don't want the moms to get mad if I didn't invite somebody...moms are vicious too. Some moms will call you right out to your face...you didn't invite my kid...you feel like a jerk. I think with the girl drama, the mom drama's there too. I think that's what feeds it sometimes.

Although at times Amelia bristles against the smallness of Leonard, she also likes the safety it affords, “I think if I was in the city and I ended up single with two small children I... would be nervous...here [in Leonard] I feel very safe in my home. I feel very safe on my street even though all these people are nosy.” Amelia could not envision living in a city, although she does, “miss that experience with my kids [because] there’s no culture here.” Still, Amelia feels relatively happy with where she lives because it provides her with security. She also believes she has no choice in where she lives due to her divorce, “I have no choice so what am I gonna do? I have to find the best of it.”

Both of Amelia’s children did well in Leonard, and when it came time to choose a high school for her daughter, she considered many factors including her daughter’s academic options, her sports, her social life, and the future placement of her current 8th grade son. Here she describes the ways she thought about these factors,

I really want my kids to have the best education they could have. I wanted my kids to go to the best school for them...with my daughter it was a struggle because she had the choice...she had [WTHS] which is like an inner city school, which I think she would have graduated top ten percent of her class and...[she] could have gone to Ivy League schools.[But] there’s no social life [for her there]...none...you go there to get educated and you leave. There’s a lot of fighting...metal detectors...but she’s very smart...she would thrive just because of the academics...but she’s also an incredible athlete and their athletics are horrible.

The appeal of JHS was its overall package. Amelia chose JHS for her daughter for this reason. Here she describes her thinking process,

At [JHS] everybody's smart. Everybody's athletic. It's a very competitive, academically and athletically. But there's a social aspect to it that was the clincher for us...she can walk out...[JHS] is the full high school experience... she can go out after school...and walk to a pizza place."

Notably, also Amelia also wanted her daughter to go because JHS has a sibling rule. Her son would have an automatic acceptance into JHS if his sister went there, as siblings are accepted into JHS if they meet criterion. Amelia's son will be attending JHS in the fall too. Amelia says,

We kind of pushed her [daughter] to go to [JHS] [so that her brother] would automatically get in...it she didn't go there we would have had to put [our son] in the lottery and then who knows where he could have ended up. A lot of kids [her son's year] didn't get in [to JHS].

Amelia did not feel WTHS was a good option for her son because, "even though he has the same grades as [his sister] he is tiny." Amelia calls her daughter, "tough and mature." She feels that she would have been able to handle WTHS and that WTHS, "would have set her up for that path [the Ivy League] if she wanted to do that...and she would have been a star athlete there too." In contrast Amelia felt very strongly that her son could not handle WTHS,

[WTHS] is tough, there's a lot of fighting, there's a lot of violence...I think you have to have a tough exterior. [My son] is tough, but he's little. I think he might get pushed around a bit, not on purpose but in the hallways, switching classes [if] a fight breaks out I feel he could get toppled over. [My daughter] is just smarter, street smart, she would see it [a fight] coming [and know how to avoid it].

Amelia's son is content and happy to attend JHS. He is close with his friends from Leonard and that is driving his decision,

He's like, 'I just want to be with my friends. I just want to be with my friends'...he's had three best friends [and] he's gonna soar with the same kids probably all through high school.

Amelia's daughter was more open to making new friends, making her more compatible to attend WTHS, "[She] could have [dealt with leaving her friends] because she will always have those friends...she's a different person..[she makes] a million new friends."

Throughout Amelia's interview she continually referred to her children as lucky because they were able to attend JHS, "I genuinely feel like at the end of the day we just got lucky." While she may have considered WTHS for her daughter, she had real reservations about sending her son there. She did not have to deal with that possibility due to her son's smooth admission into JHS, which was paved by her daughter's path.

When I ask Amelia about the ways school choice has affected the community of Leonard her responses are that many people are stressed out if they have to attend WTHS even though Amelia says she would not be stressed by that possibility. Here she elaborates,

For families that want the opportunity [to go to JHS]... they're very very stress[ed]...I would have sent [my kids] to [WTHS] without blinking an eye...even [my son]...I almost wish there wasn't a choice cause then all the [Leonard] kids would have gone to [WTHS]...the choice is giving everybody

anxiety...cause a lot of [my son's friends] who aren't getting in are very stressed out.

I took this opportunity in our interview to question Amelia on her statement that she would have sent her children to WTHS without "a blink of the eye" since earlier she stated she did not want her son at WTHS. Her reply was "I would [send my children to [WTHS]], but I am not like most [Leonard] moms...I see the benefit of both schools." To Amelia, she is unlike most Leonard moms because she is not actively seeking to avoid WTHS no matter what. Here she shares her experiences with friends in her son and daughter's 8th grade classes,

Some of them moved to [nearby towns where JHS is the sending high school] because they were so far down the ladder [of getting into JHS]...a lot of people moved...we're talking in a class of forty kids I would say three families moved and I know a couple families are telling me that they're gonna move if their kid doesn't get picked [in the JHS lottery]....[Then there are] my friends who sent their kids to [the local Catholic school because they] are afraid of [WTHS]. I wasn't afraid of it... [but WTHS] it didn't offer all the things my daughter wanted. It offered one...[JHS] really does offer everything.

Amelia was given the opportunity to have her children attend JHS so we do not know what may have occurred otherwise.

In the end Amelia would prefer it if everyone just tended to their own children's needs and stayed out of her choices,

That's what I didn't like about this choice program,...I'm gonna make...a decision for my child. Keep your opinion to yourself...I don't want to hear [WTHS] is

dangerous or that [the local Catholic School] is not great...Keep your opinions to yourself...as I got closer to high school it got worse and worse and worse and worse. 'Til I stopped going to stuff like book clubs...because I didn't want to hear it.

**Evelyn.** Evelyn grew up in Walden until late elementary school and moved to an adjoining, local town for the remainder of her formative education. She vividly remember the experience of moving and her gratitude for the ease of it, "I think back now how grateful I am for... because I came in as a nine, ten year old girl into a community that had been established and I was really fortunate and made friends." Evelyn goes on to make sense of why she was able to make friends so easily,

I saw other kids move in, girls move in, that didn't have as positive of an experience. And I did not think about it much more until I became a parent and teacher myself...it's sad to say...I don't want to sound like I'm overconfident...but I think I didn't have threatening appeal. I wasn't going to threaten the girls that were there in anyway. I'm quiet. And I think that was okay with them. I was able to just sort of blend in...I didn't have a powerful personality...I wasn't a different ethnicity...so it just worked out for me...I fit right in. But another girl who moved in who I became friendly with I remember the girls making fun of her because she had a big nose. It was just strange to see that and not want to be a part of it...but I didn't stand up...I again [was] quiet, I want going to assert myself even though I knew I should have.

Evelyn attended a parochial high school because her sending district high school had a poor reputation. It could be described as an apartheid school. Evelyn shared the financial toll her parents endured for this privilege,

My parents made that decision, even though it was a real struggle for them financially. At that time...they were worried about safety...and academics...and now I also believe they wanted me to just have a positive experience [in high school].

Evelyn's parents sacrificed financially for Evelyn to have a well-rounded high school experience.

Evelyn and her children have had a great experience in Leonard's school district, "[It was a] positive experience ...[in Leonard]...the teachers were great, very well organized." And, Evelyn's children did well because, "they're good test takers, they've got good memories...listening, remembering, taking a test." Evelyn did note, however, that her sons struggled, "with budgeting time...[when] it's not just...a multiple choice test but [writing] essays about how things are all interconnected." Evelyn says, "I can't blame the teachers for that." Evelyn does not look negatively towards the school system when her own sons falter.

Evelyn is aware that her financial circumstances are different than other families in Leonard since most mothers stay at home with their children, "I work [In Leonard] that makes us... different." Here Evelyn recounts a story where she could not get her son his sports uniform in time due to her work schedule,

I said to [my son], 'I'm sorry I couldn't get here any sooner...did you notice everybody [else except you] had their uniform?... [Her son responded], 'Mom,

their parents don't work!'. It was neat and we didn't go on about it, but he recognized that. My kids have always recognized that. They know our financial situation.

In describing her own experiences with school choice Evelyn shares the stories of each of her sons. Her eldest son attended an area choice school that remains nearly impossible to get into because they accept very few choice students. Her eldest son had access to this school due to familial circumstances. He went because, "has always been into music and theater...he said, 'I want to be in the marching band', and my ex-husband went to [that same] school too and was in the marching band [there], and so my son was sold." Evelyn found her son's choice more difficult for her to understand,

He [her eldest son] had gone with the same kids from pre-K through 8th grade and had a really nice relationships, [and] he was okay just leaving that behind and he actually hasn't looked back, which...kind of upsets me.

She goes onto share her concerns for her son,

I felt it was bittersweet because he's separating himself from the kids and families we've known, been with, for nine years..Is he taking a gamble?...Is he gonna go [to]... this new school and not assimilate?, and feel like an outsider?"

Evelyn was concerned for her son. She felt he took a risk in this new school and possibly could hurt his chances for an easy and painless assimilation much like she had in her high school.

Evelyn's current 8th grade child, "who is more introverted", is attending JHS in the fall and Evelyn is very pleased with this outcome. In part, she is pleased because she can continue along with the same group of families from Leonard. She says, "[The



decision was made in part because her son] has been really heavily involved in sports.” JHS is often seen as having a stronger sports program, although one that is more difficult to actually stand out in. The other part of the decision was because at [JHS] her son, “Will be [with] the same kids he’s attended school with since from pre-K...it’s a healthy part of his identity and we really respect the parents and their kids.” Furthermore, Evelyn’s son had concerns about attending the school his brother attends due to local gossip of toxic behaviors of students there. She recounts his worries, “Mom, I don’t want to get here, those kids ...drink and they vape.” and she shares her feelings about helping her son stay with the positive friendships he has already developed,

The more we thought about it, was it necessary for him to go to [the other school, when he can go to JHS] where we know where he is, who he’s with, what he is doing? We [know the] parents that have the same concerns that we do, you know and sort of the same parenting [that we do].

Evelyn believes she will not have to worry about different parenting expectations at JHS because she believes her son will stay close by his established friend group. This provides her with a feeling of comfort and security.

When I asked Evelyn if having a daughter could affect her school choice for her child she said,

Wherever [my son] ended up I wouldn't have been as worried. The girls I know it seems like have more angst. My boy will have an adjustment for sure, but the girls in general they seem more uncertain [about] new things...that uncertainty could create a stressful social scenario...it can be harder, if you’re not part of a sports team to make friends.

She also says earlier in her interview, "I hate to make gender stereotypes but...I think sometimes with parents of girls, it's a different decision. It's bigger in different ways. There are more things they might be considering from a social standpoint. " Evelyn's sons had smooth social experiences in Leonard but Evelyn believes the social needs of a daughter could factor into her high school choice.

While Evelyn is not sending her child to WTHS she is very aware of the ways that the community of Leonard has been affected by school choice. Evelyn tries to listen respectfully to conversations her peers are having and not be "insensitive" to the stress that her friends and neighbors are experiencing. Evelyn believes she has always been on "the fortunate end of [choice]" because it seems that, " [WTHS] is the school that people choose not to go to," and she does not have to send her children there. While she "knows families that are passionate about [WTHS] she also knows more families who do not want to send their children there," and some "who completely moved...because they could afford to do that." Here Evelyn shares the argument for either high school in her own words,

I think it's absurd parents aren't strongly considering [WTHS] because of the opportunity to get into colleges...but then the argument against that would be I want my kids to have a really positive overall experience...at [WTHS] they'll just sort of be in their small little microcosm, kind of going in fear from class to class and then graduating and going to Princeton.

In Evelyn's experiences, parents are either choosing a well-rounded high school experience in JHS or access to an elite private university through WTHS.

Finally, Evelyn is sensitive to the ways that the individual needs of children can “heighten the pressure” of high school choice. She shares that if a child has struggled in the past then that adds additional stress as a high school decision seems even more important to get right. Evelyn also feels that “in smaller [communities the options] sort of escalates and become a bit of a frenzy,” so that the stress of choice becomes insurmountable. Still, Evelyn reminds me that she is an outsider to this world since she does not have to choose. While Evelyn recognizes the stress her friends and peers are under she is genuinely surprised when I tell her how parents try to gain a competitive edge and get into JHS, “Clearly there’s this world that I am not privy to. I don’t like hearing there are things being done to manipulate the system, but I do feel for people in the struggle”.

**Frankie.** Frankie is a close friend and she arranged the majority of my interviews. She grew up in Leonard, and has a large, extended family that has lived in the area for two generations. She attended and graduated from WTHS, as has many in her extended family. Her eldest daughter will be attending WTHS in the fall.

Frankie went to a private religious school until 5th grade. She went to the public schools in Leonard (at her request) through middle school and then attended WTHS, “I wanted to go to public school so I left [my private school] and I went to public...through 12th grade.” Frankie attended WTHS because in her time there was no school choice, “Back in the day when we went to [WTHS] we didn’t have school choice. It wasn’t a thing back in the day. Everyone from [Leonard] either went to [WTHS or the local parochial school].” Frankie is not Catholic so that choice never applied, “it wasn’t even in our comprehension to go to [a Catholic School].”

As a student, Frankie was mostly concerned with her social life,

I just needed to make sure that I did okay enough. I didn't care about being a straight A student. My focus was on having a great social life and just having fun and being happy. I love sports, I loved my friends.

Frankie's experience at WTHS with diversity was eye-opening for her, "I did feel that even though it was a bit of a melting pot, it was a little bit of a culture shock too. I feel like socially we [Leonard students] were segregated [from Western Town students]." She elaborated on her experiences at WTHS. These experiences challenged Frankie's own social codes and mores.

I mean, it's interesting. There are kids who would walk into school...eating Cheetos and drinking orange water. I don't even know what they were drinking, I mean, the Doritos. It's so strange. Another thing, jaywalking...people would just walk into the street. It's a strange culture. I mean, I don't understand jaywalking in masses. It's just, you wait for the light. And then you get used to it. It's not the violence, it's more like the culture...I went there and I know what it's all about. It's people who disrespect teachers, its kids cutting class and having no regard for the system. It's kids screaming out when they shouldn't. It's not nice to have to live in that environment for four years.

In terms of her daughter, Frankie feels that her exposure to Western Town culture will be, "at first shocking, then interesting, and finally exhausting." Frankie shares, "My biggest concern is that she's [her daughter] is going to have to live in that environment [at WTHS]. It's not a healthy environment." Frankie believes that her daughter will be ready to leave [WTHS] at the end of her experience and she will not have had a positive

experience with diverse groups of people, rather she will leave feeling disappointed and disenchanted with the culture of her high school,

I think at first she's going to be taken back [by the student culture at WTHS] and interested in what's happening because it's gonna be interesting...I don't think she'll really be legitimately scared. I think by the end of four years she might be tired of it, which I was. It's just like ugh...it's not nice to have to live in that environment for four years...it's just a culture which I feel will be interesting at first and she'll be tired of it by senior year...that's when she'll be ready to move out and never want to move back.

Frankie is an interesting participant for many reasons. She is a multi-generational Leonard resident, while she was raised in Leonard and is raising her family here, she also rejects the small-town life that Leonard and JHS offer. Frankie feels ambivalent about the Leonard School district since they prepared her daughter for high school but left her uninspired. Furthermore, Frankie is less concerned with her children attending WTHS because in her opinion JHS caters to the lower social classes. Here she elaborates,

[JHS] is in [a county] I don't relate to in any way. When I [visited JHS] there were some interesting programs... they kept talking about how all these different ways to get college credits...it was really interesting...[but] for me I was reading in between the lines in my head saying to myself, 'they're catering to a community that can't afford these college credits... they're trying to offer them for less money so they can be ahead once they get to college'...to me..if my kids are in school for the next ten years becoming a doctor of whatever, I will do that for my kid. I don't need the half price credit...I don't want my kids to get out of [college] and just

become a teacher because they need a direction the second they get out of college...That's not who I am."

Frankie does not want her children integrating into that mentality at JHS and she sees less of a danger at WTHS because she does not believe her daughter has any danger of integrating with Western Town students. Here she says,

She's not gonna integrate in the inner city [but] she could integrate into the [JHS mentality]...which [while] it wouldn't be a bad thing..I want bigger for her...I want her to spread her wings...I don't want her to be on a track where she's learning a [profession] right away...she doesn't need [to be on] a fast track..to move back to [Leonard] and get a job [in Leonard]...I want her to travel, figure it out, think globally, think big, think interesting.

I asked Frankie if WTHS is going to provide the interesting education Frankie wants for her children and and Frankie says, "no". She expects to be the one who enriches her children outside of school through travel and such. But she still feels attending JHS is more insidious and destructive towards the goals she has set for her daughter,

I'm rejecting [JHS] for her...because even if she might enjoy her high school experience more, it's a very white bread community...it feels very small town...they try to reach[the] kids...get them thinking about the future...[but it's not a future I want for her].

When I ask Frankie if feels differently about where her sons should go to high school she does not, "I'm not worried about my sons getting mixed up in a bad crowd. I think they know who they are. They'll be better than fine [at WTHS]. I think that they will be great."

Frankie does have strong feelings about school choice negatively impacting WTHS because it “disperses the Leonard’s students in all different directions”. Frankie had the experience of attending WTHS with the majority of her peers from Leonard and she has seen the population of Leonard students decline with the introduction of school choice. This decline directly affects Frankie’s daughter who only has two friends attending WTHS and Frankie is concerned about this. In particular, Frankie does not quite know whom her daughter will be able to socialize with in high school. Here Frankie share how school choice has impacted her children’s high school experiences

I feel like choice has been negative. When I went to [WTHS] we didn't really have all these choices. I feel like all the kids from [Leonard] went together. Now the community has gotten so diluted. [My daughter] has two friends going to [WTHS]. The numbers are much smaller. If the 43 kids are broken up, then we’re not together. [The Leonard] community doesn't go together...we all start separating. We’re a small community to begin with... In all honesty, [Leonard] is the most affluent community in this whole area. If the [Leonard] kids aren’t at [WTHS] I don’t know who’s there. I don’t know who these kids are. ...Kids that have a monied background are not going to the school. There are less people in [my] socioeconomic range. I don't know who these people are. I like to know who my kid’s friends are...I think there are certain people that wanna live in certain communities, to raise their kids with like-minded parents. I find that community to be [Leonard].

The data collection portion of this study has come to completion. I strove to present the data in its rawest forms, the forms of my participant’s voices. Each participant

was given the opportunity to read over their transcripts and approve them before I began Chapter 4. It is my hope that they find their experiences to be forthright and as they anticipated they should be told. The next chapter, Chapter 5, is the last in this study. It presents my own analysis in light of my research questions and Bourdieu's theoretical framework.



## Chapter 5

### Conclusions and Implications

This study was designed to explore the decisions that White middle class mother's made about high school choices in Leonard City. It documents what the literature has found on a national scale; school choice promotes segregation, not integration (Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014), and confirms the importance of creating current education policy explicitly calling for diversity measures (Hu, 2018; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014). Simultaneously, this study also offered an opportunity to add to the literature by documenting the intimate experiences of White middle class mothers making high school choices in a small town. In capturing the conversations of this specific unit of analysis, my data has documented both the explicit and implicit power these women wield in our social structure and uncovers the ways that race and social class remain very much a part of educational opportunity (Horvat, 2003; Yin, 2014). The collected data underscores Pierre Bourdieu's theories of habitus, cultural capital, field, and exclusion by highlighting the ways that school choice in Leonard offers yet another avenue for the White Middle class to maintain social hierarchy (Horvat, 2003). Finally, small town life in Leonard adds a unique perspective in the literature, which is mainly focused on the effects of school choice in large cities (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013). School choice in a small town meant a heightened sense of frenzy and competition amongst parents who were competing for a limited number of school choice slots at JHS (Fiel, 2015).

A case study was developed to encapsulate Leonard's experience with high school choice and a bound unit of analysis, White Middle Class Leonard mothers of 8th

grade students, kept the lens tightly focused on a manageable and important scope (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014). Three research questions and corresponding theoretical propositions were developed in order to answer the overarching questions regarding school choice. These research questions and their propositions are as follows:

1. How and why do White middle class mothers in Leonard make their specific high school choices for their children?
2. How are these individual choices affected by and shaped by living in Leonard City?
3. How are these choices grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theories of habitus and cultural capital?

*Theoretical propositions*

Theoretical Proposition 1: The educational experiences of the parents will shape the school choices that they make for their children (Hanah-Jones, 2016; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Olson, 2009).

Theoretical Proposition 2: The individual needs of a child will shape the choices school parents make for their child (Demerath et. at. 2010; Reinoso, 2008).

Theoretical Proposition 3: One's social class is a vital determinant for the school choices that families make for their children (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, Evans and Yee, 2012; Roda & Wells, 2012).

Theoretical Proposition 4: Families in higher social classes compete to place their children in advantageous school options (Crozier et. al, 2008; Demerath, Lynch, Williams, Peters & Davidson, 2010; Fiel, 2015; Reay & Lucey, 2003; Reay, 2005)

Theoretical proposition 5: The middle class school competition hurts the schooling choices and experiences of those who are not middle class (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2013; Kozol, 2005; Reay & Lucey, 2003; Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Rothstein 2013/2015).

Theoretical Proposition 6: Race and social class are intertwined and thus school choice often puts students of color at a disadvantage (Kozol, 1991/2005; Horvat, 2003/2006; Massey & Denton, 1993).

For the purposes of this study, I collected data from multiple sources including interviews, documents, field notes, and reflective journals. Multiple forms of data collection allowed me to triangulate and verify data (Yin, 2014). Interview subjects were purposefully selected from a sample of women who met the criterion of being White, Middle class and the mother of an 8th grade student in Leonard (Patton, 1990). Interviews were conducted in person in a semi- structured, emergent style. They lasted about an hour. Several weeks later a follow up interview was conducted on the phone lasting from fifteen to thirty minutes (Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Yin, 2014). Findings were presented in Chapter 4. This chapter includes a summary of the data and answers the research questions. Following this summary, key findings and themes are explored as are the limitations of this study, and implications for future research and leadership. The study ends with a reflective piece considering why I first began the project and how I have changed in the process.

### **Summary of the Data**

The data can be categorized in two ways. The first involves the investigation of local school board minutes in Leonard City from 2010-2019 as well as several local

newspapers in Leonard and Jewel City and their coverage of school choice in their area. The second category of data are the individual choices Leonard mothers make. The results of the Board minutes and media findings support the idea that structures, such as school choice, add to the advantages of those with power, often at the expense of those who do not have power (Billingham & Hunt, 2016). The reasons why individuals make their high school choices have complexity and nuance, as is the case with individuals. My data also confirms what the literature consistently points to, which is that the underlying the needs of the individuals consistently trump any personal desires to ensure equity (Fiel, 2015; Roda & Wells, 2013).

**Board of education minutes.** The clearest theme garnered from the Leonard Board of Education minutes is that the choice program has allowed the Leonard School district to maintain its same budget for almost a decade, making it possible for Leonard to maintain an independent school system in the face of a shrinking population. Leonard students who attend JHS are paid for by the state. Students attending WTHS are paid for from the Leonard school district. This reveals an incentive for the Leonard schools to cultivate a relationship with Jewel High School. It also reveals an incentive to remain uninvolved and disinterested in Western Town High School. The data from school board meetings reveal these tendencies, both a strong relationship with JHS and a limited one with WTHS personnel.

**Local newspapers.** The local papers in Jewel carefully documented the experiences of school choice in their town and the data provides perspectives of JHS school administrators speaking at length about the experience of implementing school choice in the Jewel community. Local school personnel discussed concerns the

community had about starting school choice in their district, which were mainly focused on keeping undesirable students from “inner cities” from coming into their school system. In order to address these fears, the school district carefully crafted admission criteria intentionally designed to seek out families with, “ the means to attend private or parochial schools.” This correlates with the literature showing that most White middle class parents want a comfortable level of diversity with primarily White students (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Roda, 2013). JHS has a heavy hand in controlling their school district’s diversity, and data collected from the ten years of JHS choice programming shows those results. JHS choice students increased 13% over the past ten years but JHS demographics remain well over 90% White.

More data collected from the same local news source also records JHS school personnel speaking at length about the increase of diversity in their district. In the article, diversity is highlighted as an important JHS value and a school official mentions the various local townships that now attend JHS, thus achieving diversity. Yet, when looking at the demographics of the school, which hovers at 95% White, we know that most of the students drawn from these local townships are White. Furthermore, we learn in the article that in 2016-2017, JHS admitted 194 choice students from thirteen districts. Fifty-two of these students were from Leonard, making this tiny district of a little over 300 mainly White students, the biggest majority holder of choice students. Pointedly missing from the article on diversity is any discussion of the inclusion of students from Western Town. Data from the article shows that JHS admitted one student from nearby Western Town, a district that has about 7,000 students, of whom over 95% are students of color.

**Individual choices.** The data I collected on individual mothers in Leonard choosing a high school reveal both the unique quest of the individual striving to meet the perceived needs of their children, as well as an alignment with Bourdieusian theory indicating that individual choices are always underpinned by social structures, in this case race and class (Horvat, 2003). While most mothers interviewed wanted to meet the needs of their children, they had to do so within the constraints of the most viable school options available to them; WTHS and JHS. For some mothers, this choice was enough. For others, it was unbearable. This range was due to both the individual needs of the child and the expectations of the mother, which are derived from her particular habitus (Horvat, 2003; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Merolla, 2014). At one end of the spectrum were mothers that seemed serene about the outcome of their choices. At the other end were mothers who were filled with anxiety. In the middle were feelings about the community of Leonard and the ways that school choice had impacted this community. Below are the findings from the data as used to answer the research questions.

**Research Question #1: *How and why do White middle class mothers in Leonard make their specific high school choice for their children?***

I had theorized that the individual needs of the child would shape the choices school mothers made for their child (Demerath et. at. 2010; Reinoso, 2008). Overall, I found this to be true. Mothers in Leonard continually talked about choosing a high school that best suited their individual child's needs and a variety of factors were considered during the decision making process. The factors most often discussed were the academic, social, or athletic needs of the child. My interview subjects either viewed Western Town High School or Jewel High School as their best options. Both schools have the reputation

of offering solid academic programs and would provide a clear pathway to college. Other options were often too expensive, too far, or were perceived as not providing an adequate education. From these two choices formed two camps. The first were mothers in Leonard who saw JHS as offering an overall package of the well-rounded high school experience. These mothers often spoke about the beauty of the school grounds, the excellent sports programming, and the overall appeal of going to a school where the students could walk around the town during their free time. In a larger sense, these mothers were pleased to replicate the current experience their children were having in Leonard. Choosing JHS meant choosing a known experience that offered a solid path to a comfortable and White middle class life. Conversely, mothers who sought out WTHS for their child believed that the advantages their child could gain in attending WTHS outweighed any personal discomforts that they knew their children might face. These mothers tended to talk about acquiring the skill of diversity, the AP course catalog, and the advantages that their White, middle class child could have in gaining entrance into an elite university as the main factors persuading them to choose WTHS. While these mothers understood their child would enter into a culture very different than Leonard's, most strongly felt that the individual child was capable of navigating these differences and getting the best of what WTHS could offer.

Within the overarching choice of JHS or WTHS were the various particularities of each individual child. The data shows that it was these particularities which, most often swayed the mother's choice in one direction or another. For example, if the child was an excellent student, mothers felt that sending their child to WTHS could increase their chances at the Ivy League and they were more likely to be comfortable with that choice.

These children would be in the honors or AP courses in classrooms, which are housed in their own area of the school, and thus their academic classes would only be with serious students. Whereas Leonard students who were less academically successful were less likely to attend WTHS. Most participants cited academic focus as an important trait to have for any Leonard student attending WTHS. Having their child in the general population of the school, which is primarily students of color, generally swayed Leonard mothers against WTHS. The social success of the individual child were also strongly considered. Past troubles could sway a high school direction, and gender often reared its head when discussing the social needs of an individual child. Many of the mothers felt their daughters were more mature and capable of handling the urban experience of WTHS. They believed their daughters would remain focused on attending a great college. Mothers often expressed concern over sending their sons to WTHS. Boys were often described as too immature or physically incapable of handling such a large, urban school setting, and many participants feared their boys could get into trouble if they attended WTHS. This trouble could take the form of either connecting with students from Western Town, which could lead their child down a negative path, or of being physically assaulted by the students of color from Western Town. Several of my mothers knowingly admitted prioritizing JHS' risk free social environment for their sons rather than the possibility of an elite college in order to keep them safe. Conversely many mothers expressed concern about their daughters handling the tight-knit social setting in JHS. Often girls were cited as having trouble with the small social setting in Leonard too. Many mothers viewed WTHS as an opportunity for their daughters to branch out socially and escape the often cliquy and narrow focused social world of small town life. When I asked mothers in my



follow-up interviews about the role gender played in their decisions, most were reluctant to view it as the role of gender. Instead, these mothers insisted that they were making decisions based on the needs of their individual child, and gender was not the cause of these decisions. Still, the patterns in the data remained clear over the course of many of the interviews, girls and boys were perceived differently in their abilities to function and succeed in WTHS.

**Research Question #2: *How does the context of Leonard City affect an individual mother's high school choices?***

I theorized that families in higher social classes compete to place their children in advantageous school options. Both the literature and data confirmed this to be true (Crozier et. al, 2008; Demerath, Lynch, Williams, Peters & Davidson, 2010; Fiel, 2015; Reay & Lucey, 2003; Reay, 2005). The literature also showed that the way most White middle class families secure strong schools is that they choose to live in an area with a well-regarded school district (Goyette & Lareau, 2015). The Leonard K-8 school district is both highly regarded within the Leonard community and within its neighboring communities. It was recently awarded a state distinction of honor and the schools are generally viewed as a selling point for young homeowners looking at the community. My interview subjects all are aware of the strong reputation of Leonard schools. However, data gathered from the interviews of the mothers revealed a variety of opinions about the Leonard school district regardless of its positive reputation. I had originally theorized that a positive or negative opinion of the Leonard school system would influence the mother's high school choices, but the data did not show any patterns. What data did show is that

the personal opinions of the mother seem to heavily influence a child's schooling experiences whilst in Leonard.

I also theorized that mothers raised in Leonard, or in towns similar to Leonard, would be satisfied with their experiences in the Leonard school system. My data on this does not have a consistent finding. What I did find was that if the experiences of the mother and child mirrored each other. If the mother liked the Leonard school district, then her retelling of her child's experience was positive too. Conversely, a negative opinion often coincided with the child's experiences being negative too. What is difficult to extract from the data is, which comes first? If the mother continues along a pleasant course with the school and conveys this to her child does the child continually internalize these feelings and perceive their experience as positive? Or, are the mothers that are pleased with the district pleased because they genuinely feel this way and their children never happened to experience strife? This seems unrealistic. Rather, it seems to be the way the mothers handle the strife their children encounter that sets the tone for their children's experiences in Leonard. For example, the girl drama that Amelia's child experienced was smoothed over by Amelia as unpleasant, but manageable. Her daughter was able to handle it. Whereas Erica's children often felt attacked in the school district, particularly by their teachers, whom Erica described as traumatizing. Were Erica's children actually traumatized by the school staff or were they simply susceptible to her lead?

I further theorized that mothers who were pleased with their experience in the Leonard School system would look to replicate that by choosing JHS. What the findings show is that it is the individual needs of the child that most dictate where they will attend

high school. Again, with the exception of Erica who felt constrained by her choices, the mother will choose the school where she believes her child will be most successful regardless of past experiences, or experiences in the Leonard school district.

A finding that did surface in the majority of interviews and related to the context of Leonard affecting high school choices was of the experience of raising children in what was described as a sheltered environment, or a “little bubble.” This “little bubble”, or Leonard, was to some mothers comforting and others cloying. The data shows a connection between the relationship of the mother to the “little bubble” and to her high school choice for their child. Mothers who enjoyed their small town life were not resistant to replicating it by choosing JHS. They saw the value in staying in the local community and did not often need to seek out more for their children. Parker was one such mother who saw the experience of her son as nurturing and intimate. She looked for this similar experience in high school for her son. Mothers who valued the tight knit community of Leonard, like Evelyn who wanted her son to keep his long standing friendships with families whose values she shared, were also pleased with tight knit community of JHS. Whereas, those mothers who felt stifled by small town life or clearly saw the pitfalls of its insular nature, either rejected JHS outright, such as Frankie, or felt some ambivalence about sending their children there, like Amanda. This group of mothers explicitly said they wanted more for their children; more exposure, more diversity, more personal growth. Many had negative things to say about the community of Leonard, even if their child was successful in the school district. They wanted them to have experiences outside of Leonard and the surrounding communities. Yet, Amanda’s data continues to illustrate the weight of one’s child’s individual needs. Amanda’s

concern about the insular nature of JHS was overruled by her doubt that her daughter could succeed in WTHS. She chose JHS, reluctantly, for her daughter.

When I asked mothers how the experience of having this relatively new school choice program affected their community there were a variety of responses. These will be more fully addressed in the key findings but are outlined here. My fifth theoretical proposition supposes that middle class school competition hurts the schooling choices and experiences of those who are not middle class (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2013; Kozol, 2005; Reay & Lucey, 2003; Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Rothstein 2013/2015). This finding was mainly true and many participants acknowledged the loss of funding and declining programming they saw in WTHS since the inception of school choice. They worried about WTHS, but this worry was mainly contained to its ability to upkeep a vibrant AP catalog, and attract enough Leonard students to make the school a viable option for their children. Many also talked at length about how unfair it is that JHS is getting state money and also able to as Erica said, “skim the cream of [Leonard] students”. Overall, Leonard mothers were concerned with the ways the school choice program was divvying up Leonard resources and not the ways that school choice competition was affecting the remaining WTHS population.

**Research Question #3: *How are these choices grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theories of habitus and cultural capital?***

Research question three examines school choice in Leonard through Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical frameworks of habitus, cultural capital, and field, the ways that these concepts explain the relationships between individuals and structures, and in turn social reproduction (Nash, 1990; Thatcher et. al., 2016). Habitus is transmitted from the

family starting in early childhood and supplies an individual with the proclivities of their social class; an intuitive membership derived mainly from the family but also from the school (Bourdieu, 1975/1996; Thatcher, 2016). The notion of capital is understood as the resources available to an individual, which are parlayed into both tangible and intangible capitals through social, economic and cultural embodiments (Bourdieu, 1996; Thatcher et. al, 2016). This study is mainly concerned with cultural capital, or markers such as values, tastes, and preferences that signify social class to the outside world (Bourdieu, 1987/1996; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Cultural capital is crucial because it converts to tangible capital in the forms of degrees, professional avenues, and financial success (Nash, 1990). Thus, the transmission of these cultural traits is vital for future generational wealth and a cause of intra-class competition to secure resources within fields of contest (McDonough et.al, 2000; Nash, 1990). This research question examines this transmission, capturing the ways that the habitus and cultural capital of a White Middle Class mother both shapes her school choices and advances her child (Bourdieu, 1987/1996; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Nash, 1990).

Aside from one's family, Bourdieu viewed school as modernity's most important agency for cultural and social reproduction and a cornerstone of competition for the advancement and maintenance of one's social status (Bourdieu 1996; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996; McDonough et. al., 2000; Nash, 1990). The dominant culture is valued and promoted by individuals in the school system and advanced through earning advanced coursework programs, diplomas, and pathways to college and beyond (Bourdieu, 1996; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1986; Laureau, 2011; Willis, 1981). Schools

differentially value and reward those students who possess dominant capital. Furthermore, the habitus of those in the dominant positions both anticipate and expect that these pathways will be available to them, easing their way into professional careers and continued lives of privilege (Lareau, 2011). Those in dominant positions hold considerable power for they have a far easier time maintaining these positions than those trying to ascend to them. From this lens it seems easy to see how school choice is destined to fail as an equalizer if it not strictly overseen. While it may be true that some disadvantaged families are able to utilize school choice to advance their children, it is also true that those in advantaged positions are able to advance within the field of school choice.

In Leonard, White middle class mothers unwittingly, but willingly, engage with the structure of school choice in order to maintain their social status and reproduce their lives of privilege for their children (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1986). The mothers I interviewed spent considerable time deliberating about how to best position their children in high school to maximize their opportunities for future success (Bourdieu, 1975; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996; McDonough et. al., 2000). Intertwined with their habitus and cultural capital is Bourdieu's layered component of practice or an individual's skill in parlaying her privileges into opportunities (Horvat, 2003; Nash, 1990). Practice can be understood as individual agency on a field of competition and Bourdieu explained this agency as spontaneous and improvised (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; McDonough et. al., 2000). This spontaneity or flexibility offers an explanation for individual ownership over the choices one makes for their child (McDonough et. al, 2000). Yet, an individual's practice is still rooted in habitus and access to cultural capital, and thus, is constrained by

structure too (McDonough et. al, 2000). An individual will use their habitus and access to cultural capital to practice, or obtain resources, to the best of their abilities (McDonough et. al, 2000). Thus, practice is Bourdieu's explanation of the ways that both individual agency and structure smoothly fit together to naturally allow for continual social reproduction (McDonough et. al, 2000; Nash, 1990). In other words, since each individual White middle class mother has a unique practice, her experiences on the field of school choice will look different from those with similar habitus (McDonough et.al, 2000). Yet, the similar structure underpinning each mother, mainly their White middle class status and similar cultural capital gives gravitas to Bourdieu's ideas that structural supports reside alongside individual maneuvering (McDonough et. al, 2000; Nash, 1990). Thus, while the path, or practice of each mother has differences, they all arrive at the same place on the field of school choice, and with the same goals; to reproduce a life of privilege for their child. Below is an analysis of what individual mothers were hoping to achieve for their child when they made their high school choice, and the different strategies mothers used to place their child in the high school they felt would best ensure future success' on the high stakes, and often tension-inducing field of school choice.

A final note of importance is Bourdieu's beliefs concerning the researcher. It is crucial to Bourdieu that the researcher remains reflexive, as their research is often double edged. They are both intrinsically invested in the research as well as desirous of being read and acknowledged by others (Bourdieu, 1975). As I analyze the intentions of my participants based upon the collected data, I must remain reflexive as to my intentions too. I am a White middle class mother currently making school choices for my children. Thus, this study feels personal for me and I spend time at the end of this chapter

reflecting about my role in the research study and the ways I have been worked to remain reflexive throughout it.

**Social reproduction through investments in cultural capital: Rationales behind choosing JHS or WTHS.** High school choice, the field that Leonard mothers are engaging with, is a crucial field for middle and upper class parents because it is viewed as an important step in securing college admissions and all that results from attending a top college (Lareau, 2011; McDonough et. al, 2000; Thrall & Martin, 2010). While I did discuss a few private, parochial, and charter options in the area, the bulk of Leonard parents choose between two area high schools, the sending district school, WTHS, and JHS, a choice school. The mothers that I interviewed wanted to make the best choice for their individual child in order to maximize their child's chances at maintaining and enhancing their own cultural capital and resulting privilege (Thrall & Martin, 2010).

The first choice high school choice that Leonard mothers might make is to choose Jewel High School. This choice can be seen as a direct reproductive strategy chosen by mothers in the hopes that their child will replicate the experience they had in White, Christian, middle-class Leonard. Data shows that mothers choosing this path, with the exception of Amanda, have had very positive experiences in Leonard. This indicates that the habiti of these mothers connects with a smaller and more intimate community, and illustrates the idea that social class is often understood in the ways an individual feels a sense of belonging and a sense of difference (Burke, 2016). Most of the mothers who chose JHS have a sense of belonging to this type of social circle, are comfortable with this model, and want to replicate it for their child. It makes sense that they would gravitate towards a school that will inculcate their students in these ways (Bourdieu &



Passeron, 1996). Mothers choosing JHS relate to the forms of cultural capital that this particular high school offers their child and often prioritize these forms of cultural capital over other forms (Thrall & Martin, 2010). This includes social capital that keeps their children interconnected to more intimate communities like Leonard. For example, Kate prioritizes “positive role models”, “[with] kids less inclined to goof off” for her son over his entrance into an elite university. Evelyn wants her son to have friends with families she already knows and, “similar parenting expectations”. She, “pictured her son at [JHS] walking past kids who were positive towards him,” and having “proper leadership from the upperclassmen.” Evelyn went on to say that, “the whole community of [JHS] is a happy school” Parker echoed Evelyn’s sentiments and added that what she loved that about Leonard schools was that her son could not, “fall through the cracks” there. Parker believes that sort of intimacy is crucial to her son’s success and wants to continue to give him in an “intimate environment [at JHS]...where he won’t be lost or just like a number.”

Furthermore, parents choosing JHS prioritize the social freedom that their children will be able to have at JHS, which mirror the social freedoms found in Leonard. Kate loves that her son can “ride his bike to local business after school,” and Amanda is pleased that her son will not have to worry about having possessions stolen if he leaves them on sporting fields. Amelia shares that she does not have to worry about safety if she picks her daughter up late at night. She also shares, “there’s a social aspect to [JHS] that was the clincher for us, she can walk out [side] at [JHS]...[she] can get pizza...you can’t do that at [WTHS].” Attending JHS means that children can continue living in a community that is similar to the one experienced in Leonard. It also means that their

children will accrue a sense of independence that is actually dependent on living in this sort of space that those attending WTHS will not.

Conversely, mothers in Leonard might decide to send their child to WTHS. While this choice looks radically different from JHS, the goal is the same, it is meant to provide one's children with the best chances of culturally reproducing privilege (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1986). The difference is that these mothers prioritized different cultural capital for their children to succeed in the future they envisioned for them. They craved worldly experiences for their children, possibly signaling a habitus that feels a sense of belonging or comfort in a more diverse community (Burke, 2016). Their children's futures included living in urban environments, travelling, and experiencing a global world. As Frankie shared, "I want her [daughter] to spread her wings, travel, figure it out, think globally, think big, think interesting..." Rebecca too said, "This is their chance to really figure out who they want to be...I feel like if you don't give yourself a chance to try different experiences you're short changing yourself." Thus, the cultural capital that mothers believed their children could acquire in WTHS, namely "navigating diversity", and being in a diverse environment would complement their larger goals for them and better prepare them for the broader experiences than that of an all White school and community.

The majority of the mothers choosing WTHS, Emily, Frankie, Hope, and Rebecca, also viewed Leonard as a place to leave, possibly indicating that they were unsettled in the small community of Leonard, again highlighting ways individuals most strongly understand their themselves and their social class by articulating who they are

and are not (Burke, 2016). Emily and Frankie in particular were hostile towards the small town aspect of Leonard and Jewel. Frankie shared,

I do not [my daughter] to get comfortable [in JHS], move back to [Leonard], get a job in [Leonard]...if she does come back [to Leonard] I want her to take what she's learned in the outside world and bring it back here. I don't want her to learn everything here. [meaning in Jewel or Leonard]

Many of the mothers choosing WTHS, felt that JHS boxed their children into a safe, solid middle class existence, and that did not align with what these mothers wanted for their children's future. It was not where they were comfortable (Burke, 2016). Frankie says, "I'm rejecting it...is a very white bread community." While these mother's were not necessarily overjoyed with WTHS, they liked the idea that it would propel their children out into the world more than the life that JHS seemed to offer.

More precisely what these mothers coveted, more so than a diverse experience, was the tantalizing possibility that their children could graduate at the top of their class in WTHS and attend an Ivy League college. Mothers were tapping into the unique position WTHS offered their privileged and White children, mainly less academic competition, a better possibility of standing out academically, and improved chances at attending an elite college (Fiel, 2015). They viewed WTHS as a springboard into the Ivy League or other highly selective colleges and were aware and excited that they had found a niche to offer their children a competitive edge on the field of college admissions by making this choice (Fiel, 2015). Hope shared, " [WTHS] for fifteen years straight graduated the most students going to those schools...with very exclusive criteria...MIT, Stanford, Princeton, Penn..." Or, consider Randy who said about her daughter, "she would be the cream of

the crop there...why wouldn't she go there?" It is clear from my interviews that these mothers mainly desired acceptance into an elite university and that is why they were willing to let their children go to a school very different than the environment in Leonard. Frankie describes WTHS as, "not a nice environment to have to live in". But Evelyn gives a clear rationale why parents choose this environment because while they, "go in fear from class to class [they]..then... go to Princeton".

Most mothers brought up in their interviews that only children who could academically excel were fit to attend WTHS. And many mothers shared that they were unlikely to send their child to WTHS if they could not succeed at a high academic level. Even Rebecca, who really wanted her daughter to go to WTHS for a diverse experience and an opportunity to spread her wings shared, "if my daughter was on the lower level academically, I might not consider [WTHS]." For Amanda this meant that even though she believed WTHS was a better fit for her daughter, she still sent her to JHS because she did not qualify for advanced tracking there. In fact, only Emily was willing to send her current 8th grader to WTHS in the general academic track where she shares, "[her elder] daughter was the only White kid in her math class." Emily also was the only mother who did not allow her children to take standardized testing, thus disqualifying them from the choice lottery at JHS. Her decisions are often at odds with the rest of my participants.

This codicil adjoining the mother's rationale on whether or not her child can attend WTHS is a commentary on the relationship among habitus, cultural capital, and the institutional structures that support and advance them (Lareau, 2011). These mothers do not feel comfortable having their children in academic spaces as one of the only, or the only White child in the class. The institution, WTHS, has responded to this need

through advanced academic tracking in which the majority of mothers in this study place their children (Lareau, 2011). And, the mothers in Leonard expect this sort of tracking. As Frankie says of WTHS, “They’re prepared for [Leonard parents]. They know a lot of [Leonard] parents want their children to be professionals...they are prepared for us.”

This desire to segregate from those in subordinate positions can also be viewed in the realm of Bourdieu’s indirect exclusion, the most powerful form of dominance that a social group exercises (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). This form of exclusion tacitly sets up the idea that subordinate groups are supposed to be in subordinate positions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). In the case of WTHS, this means that the general education track is not acceptable for White students from Leonard, whom should either be in the advanced tracking or not have to attend WTHS at all. And, it also means that the school should be specifically prepared to attend to the needs of the Leonard community. Certainly it is a commentary on the cumulative effects that race and social class have on the academic experiences of students in this school and the chasms it creates between these two towns (Horvat, 2003).

**Practicing on the field of school choice: Maternal strategies for school placement.** Mothers making school choices for their children engage in strategic maneuvering to ensure their choices are seen through to fruition (Lareau, 2011; Thrall & Martin, 2010). These strategies are what Bourdieu termed practice, or the ways individuals fluidly interact with structures in attempts to have their needs met (McDonough et al, 2000). Attending JHS is not guaranteed. Students have to both meet the criteria for the choice program and then get chosen from the lottery system to attend. While many of my participants shared that some families do move to the JHS district if

their child does not gain admittance, this strategy is not very realistic for most family's intent on attending JHS. At the same time, attending WTHS requires maternal preparation, too, so students are prepared for advanced academic tracking. The concept of Bourdieu's practice is glimpsed in the preparations the mothers have made and the strategies they partake in preparing their children to attend JHS or WTHS well before freshman year of high school. Also seen are the ways that the Leonard school system seeks to prepare students specifically for these two high school choices.

One strategy parents engaged in was the evaluation and assessment of their individual children to determine where they had the best chances of succeeding in high school. Parents choosing between WTHS and JHS both engaged in this analysis. Some mothers like Amelia and Kate determined that their children were ill-equipped to handle the diverse social experiences at WTHS and thus, had to attend JHS. Kate shared, "I felt that [at WTHS] there was gonna be more discipline [problems]...he would see kids getting in serious trouble and [my son] would think it's cool." In contrast, Amanda had to consider the academic placement of her daughter since she knew that her daughter would not be in the advanced track at WTHS. Thus, that school became a less appealing option for her, "I didn't want to take a chance [on WTHS] and I would have only sent her to [WTHS] if she were an honor's student and I would send her to a great college". For some mothers like Parker and Evelyn, the choice was less tense because they both had other options they were pleased with besides WTHS. While JHS was their first choice they were comfortable that their children would be successful in their second choice, which was not WTHS, too. Frankie, Hope, Randy, and Rebecca were satisfied with WTHS because they felt strongly that their children could succeed there. These mothers

did not display anxiety about getting into JHS. Rebecca shared that, “the day came [when they drew the lottery at JHS] and I wasn’t even thinking about it...I was like, I forgot it was even (laughs) happening today”. Whereas Kate, Amelia, and Amanda did not view other area options including WTHS as a tool in advancing their child’s futures. As Amanda shared about her daughter, “Right now it’s academic for me...[I need to get her] into a good college...then [she] can have her fun in college.” To these mothers entrance JHS was more high stakes.

Several mothers mentioned another planning strategy to secure resources, meaning a future choice seat, at JHS. This, too, points to differences in approaches to practice. Consider the ways an individual mother might utilize the unique sibling opportunity JHS offers. Currently, a sibling automatically gets into JHS if they meet criteria. Compare the interviews of Amelia and Parker in strategizing for this opportunity. Parker mentioned her younger daughter but never mentioned this sibling opportunity until I brought it up to her during our interview. Parker then affirmed that she knew about this opportunity but made no mention about planning for her daughter’s future through her son’s current choices. Whereas Amelia shared with me on her own accord that one of the reasons she pushed her elder daughter to attend JHS, even though, “[WTHS] would have set her up for [the Ivy League]” is because her son was too small to attend WTHS and they could not send him there. Amelia had considered her strategy for her son two years before he would even start high school through the positioning of her daughter’s high school placement, illustrating the ways that individual practices can influence the outcomes of those in similar social classes.

Academic strategies were also employed to ensure students meet academic criteria at JHS. Randy shared that she not only dropped her daughter's math class because she was in danger of getting a C, but also was able to procure a study hall for her child in Leonard during the day so her daughter could study in peace. As Randy told me, "not many people know you can take a study hall in [Leonard]". It is interesting to note that Randy also told me that her daughter's "math teacher told me to take her out of advanced math," so that she would be eligible for JHS. This indicates an investment from Leonard teachers and reinforcement from structures in supporting White Middle Class mothers who want their child to get into JHS. Amanda also took her daughter out of the advanced math program because she "felt it was moving too fast", and also hired her a math tutor to assure her child had the best chances for a strong math grade. During my follow up interviews I specifically asked if parents made changes to their child's schedule in relation to their high school choices. Evelyn was shocked to learn that this happened in Leonard, that parents might drop a course in order to avoid a C on their child's report card, disqualifying them from entering the JHS lottery. She said, "I don't see myself as bending the rules [and] I don't like hearing there are things being done to manipulate the system". "No" both Parker and Hope also said they would not alter their children's course load if they were in danger of getting a C. Hope said, "I would not have pulled my son out for a C in academics". Rebecca and Erica have more ambivalent ideas about such strategies. Rebecca said, "I did not have to deal with it because my daughter did well in math", but "[I] could see why people would pull their child from a class if they were getting a C or D". While Rebecca did not have to engage with this strategy she recognizes that she may have if her child's circumstances were different. Whereas, Erica



discussed the tactics of other mothers with disgust, illustrating her lack of desire to engage with the school choice process and frustration with it. She said, “it’s silly, people get outside help from [Leonard] teachers...when the work should be done in school”. She further distances herself from the “silly” mothers who compete for JHS by sharing, “it’s not like they’re trying to get into Exeter, it’s [JHS]”. With this statement Erica is both revealing her own cultural capital and class status to me, the interviewer, by sharing her knowledge of an elite private school and also dismissing the importance of attending JHS for her own children. She is possibly protecting herself from judgments that other mothers may have of her since she opted out of having her children take the required standardized tests to enter JHS (Thrall & Martin, 2010).

Several of the mother’s interviewed who said they would not engage in academic strategies to gain entrance into JHS did engage in athletic strategies for their children as they were preparing to send to high school. JHS is viewed as a more competitive in high school sports. Amelia shared, “At [WTHS], their sports suck”. While her daughter is a “star...player”, Amelia’s son is not. She would like him to be “a three sport kid” and has strategized that his size is the best way to gain an advantage for him. Since he is small she is, “encouraging him to do crew because he could be a coxswain”. A coxswain is a position on the boat for a smaller person, and Amelia is seeking ways to gain advantages for her son in sports due to his size. Hope shared that since her son was attending WTHS she, “didn’t push basketball because I knew he probably wouldn’t be playing it at [WTHS]. In this statement Hope is making racial assumptions about who plays basketball at WTHS as well as engaging in academic positioning by encouraging her son to play, “soccer and lacrosse,” sports she believes he will be able to play at WTHS.

A final note on Bourdieusian theory is the notion that while individuals are both shaped by the structures they interact with, they in turn, shape those structures too (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Horvat, 2003). It is apparent that in making individual high school choices Leonard mothers have impacted their own circumstances at both high schools (Horvat, 2003). Currently there is concern over whether or not the loss of Leonard's financial and political resources at WTHS will allow the school to maintain the necessary academic and athletic programming vital to attracting Leonard families. Both Kate and Emily discussed the decline they have seen in the WTHS's programming and whether or not the school can maintain its academic reputation in the Leonard community. Rebecca, and Hope also voiced concern about what would happen to the programming at WTHS if Leonard families continue to opt out. Furthermore, Frankie shared her concern about the social aspect of WTHS; if all of the professional families of Leonard abandon WTHS who will be her daughter's friends? At the same time JHS has accumulated power due, in part, to the ways that Leonard families have flocked to its choice program. Randy shared how the secret is now out and a lot of towns are vying for choice spots that used to go solely to Leonard students. JHS can now, according to many mothers, pick and choose the Leonard students they offer admission to and this loss of power has left many Leonard families scrambling in the high school choice process. Naturally, those in subordinate positions, namely the families from Western Town, are not participating in the scramble for high school choice, perfectly illustrating the ways that race and social class influence one's education (Horvat, 2003). Thus, the system of school choice in Leonard illustrates Bourdieu's ideas regarding symbolic power; it is a system legitimized by the state that has the power to create differences (Bourdieu, 1989).

This power is a lynchpin in reproducing the next generation's dominant class (Bourdieu, 1989).

### **Key Findings**

Two key findings emerged in my interviews regarding high school choice in Leonard City: diversity, and the consequences and privilege of choice. These findings or themes wove their way into the fabric of the majority of my interviews, as mothers struggled to make sense of the high school choices they were making. On one hand, they could choose a safe, physically appealing, White school. And, many did. But some did not. Many of the mothers I interviewed openly discussed the difficulty in the choice process not only because they wanted to make the right choices for their child but because they recognized that this choice was complex, and full of racial and class undertones. Some mothers were extremely self-reflective about their choices and their privilege. Others were not. Most interviews had mixtures of both, times when the mothers were highly aware and reflective, and others when they were less so. The overwhelming majority of my interviews and document analysis capture data which supports that [race] and class are always present in our decision-making, and thus should be brought to light to inform thinking (Bourdieu & Passaron, 1990).

**Diversity.** The topic of diversity surfaced throughout of my interviews in a variety of ways as documented in Chapter 4. Diversity is an overarching theme within the experience of high school choice in Leonard City, just as it is a theme in the history of integrating schools and school choice (Orfield et al., 2014; Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Posey-Maddox, 2008). The literature review also makes note of the ways school choice has allowed for the White Middle Class to exit school systems deemed as failing without

the burden of a geographical move (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Hirschman, 1970). In the case of Leonard City, high school choice has offered the option for families to remain in Leonard and exit WTHS, an urban characteristic school (Milner, 2015). Previous to high school choice, “all the kids from [Leonard] went to [WTHS] together”, as Frankie shared. Randy, in her interview, said that a choice option made it more appealing for some families considering living in Leonard since, “for whatever reason they don’t want to go to [WTHS].” As Evelyn points out in her interview, “[WTHS] is the school it seems, where families choose not to go.”

In this study mothers were not asked to define diversity yet this term was used throughout interviews to describe students of color, different ethnicities, a skill set to be developed in their children, and economic variability. Within the broad scope of diversity smaller themes emerged, highlighting that ongoing national conversations regarding race, social class, and school choices are both present in Leonard City and unique to its circumstances too. These next sections analyze the conversations participants had around diversity and high school choice.

**Lack of exposure to diversity.**

*“It’s much better when you’re exposed to [diversity] when you are young because by the time you get to the high school level it’s almost too late.”-Kate*

The realities of small-town life again reared its head in relation to how students from Leonard integrate into an urban characteristic school (Miler, 2015). The literature noted that White middle class families are less likely to live in diverse neighborhoods nor do they want to be a minority in a school with students of color (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012). This is true in Leonard where the population

hovers at 99% White. The student population of WTHS presently hovers at 4% White. Several of the mothers interviewed voiced concern over both their children's lack of exposure to diverse cultural and economic backgrounds, and their own minority status in WTHS which, could prove problematic to their high school experiences. Also, concern was voiced over the insularity, or "little bubble" of Leonard, which could cause trouble for their children if they entered WTHS; many simply had no meaningful experiences with persons of color to draw on. Nor were there many attachments formed between students from Western Town, Walden, or Leonard prior to attending high school to help smooth over adjustment issues.

Some mothers expressed that earlier and prolonged exposure to different ethnicities could prove beneficial to their children in learning to be comfortable with other ethnicities rather than solely White culture. This concurs with the literature, which shows that White families talk significantly less about race to their young children thus socializing them specifically to not talk about race (Brown, Tanner-Smith, Lesane-Brown, Chase & Ezell, 2007). Kate, specifically, expressed remorse in not doing a better job of exploring and exposing her children to different ethnicities. Furthermore, the lack of diversity within the school system of Leonard is not addressed either. Schools are another source of socialization and a place where children glean information about race and ethnicity (Brown et al, 2007). This deficit was brought to the attention of the Leonard School District (October; November; December, 2016) over the course of several School Board meetings but no sustained solutions have been implemented presently.

### **Negative perceptions regarding safety at WTHS.**

*“I don’t want her to feel scared but I did sit [my daughter] down and tell her ..don’t go to the bathroom by yourself...there’s things that when you go to [WTHS] you have to know, life skills.”-Randy*

Many of the captured conversations show mothers both desiring diverse experiences for their children as well as fearing the diversity that WTHS offers. As revealed in the literature review, White middle class families often want a controllable sort of diversity with specific characteristics including a critical mass of like-minded, or White, parents (Hanah-Jones, 2016; Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Roda, 2013). White families of Leonard are more often attending JHS, changing the demographics of WTHS and making even less comfortable for Leonard families to attend WTHS. This discomfort is further heightened by the systemic poverty seen in Western Town and by the lack of interaction between communities pre-high school. The fears that some parents have are rooted in statistical justification. As previously noted in chapter 1, WTHS has significantly more incidents of violence in their schools than JHS. However, when looking closely at that data, incidents reported to the police are shockingly low in both high schools<sup>5</sup>. Still, to a parent looking at the safety of a school, the data regarding safety and school climate is more concerning at WTHS where violent incidents not involving police far outnumber those seen at JHS.

Further heightening the fears regarding safety at WTHS is the way that information about schools are usually dispensed. The literature shows it is the social network of White middle class families who provide the majority of information to other

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<sup>5</sup> As previously reported in Chapter 1, JHS had 5 reported incidents of violence while WTHS had 116. However, JHS had one incident reported to the police and WTHS had two.

parents regarding schools (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Reinoso, 2008). This information is usually filtered through the mother who serves as the cornerstone of educational choices in the White middle class family (Brantlinger, 2003; Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003). Often times, a family will not even visit a school but will rely on the trusted advice of the social group to guide their own decision-making (Reay et al, 2008; Reinoso, 2008). Some of the mothers I interviewed who are sending their child to JHS did not visit WTHS. Amelia and Hope both shared that many of their friends will not even consider WTHS because they say they are afraid of the violence there, and Randy and Evelyn both made mention of WTHS being the school people choose not to go to. It was evident from the data that trusted peers and friends from the community did help form mother's decisions about their high school choices. The mothers who did consider or choose WTHS often voiced that trouble can be anywhere you go, and they specifically made mention of today's climate of school shootings. Curiously so, these school shootings have made violence at WTHS less concerning to several mothers, like Frankie and Randy, since it is clear that school shootings happen in White schools by White shooters (Livingston, Rossheim & Hall, 2019). In fact, mothers, like Randy, point out that they like the metal detectors WTHS has (often a point of concern for White middle class parents in the past) because no weapons can enter the building. Randy's perspective offers a new commentary in the era of mass school shootings. While no mothers were thrilled about the prospect of violence during their child's school day, mothers who chose WTHS made peace with the anticipated hallway fighting. They mitigated the violence their children might encounter as a part of WTHS that would not directly affect their own child's personal safety.

**Academic segregation within WTHS or diversity only within the hallways.**

*“If we can just get our kids into the honors classes, we can segregate them from the other students..”-Erica*

When Leonard mothers send their children to WTHS, it is often with the codicil that their children will be placed within the advanced track. This concurs with the research that the White middle class often are able to have institutions respond to their needs and that these responses are meant to benefit their children and not the school as a whole (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Lareau, 2011). It also speaks to Bourdieu's ideas of exclusion (Lamont & Lareau, 1998), and to the ways that the dominant class and structures interact and support each other (Horvat, 20013; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Lin, 1999; McDonough, Ventresca & Outcalt, 2000). The Leonard parents have an expectation that their children should be in the advanced track, and that the advanced track should be a separate school entity. In turn, the high school provides this expectation for the parents of Leonard. As Frankie says,

[WTHS] is prepared for [Leonard] parents. They know that a lot of [Leonard] parents want their kids to be professionals...there is an affluent community in [Leonard] who want their kids to come out of that school going to really good colleges. They are prepared for us. They know we're coming. They know where we're from. [JHS] is different.

Frankie's expectation is that the leadership of WTHS has anticipated the needs of her child and will have structures in place to advance and support her. They will be responsive to the needs of the Leonard community.



Within school choice programs, the White middle class either chooses the schools with the highest enrollment of White students or with academically elite programming that can benefit their children directly (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Riel, Parcel, Roslyn, Mickelson, Stephen, Smith, 2018). The advanced track in WTHS offers Leonard students this elite programming. I question whether the students in the general education courses get similar academic experiences as those in the advanced tracks. Mothers in my interviews did too. Kate shared, “they tend to give the best teachers to those at the highest levels...”. And Erica’s daughter, one of the only Leonard students not in advanced tracking that I interviewed, shared that her daughter’s math class of which she was the only White child, had no teacher for six weeks. Compounding the issue for Erica was that the school was completely unaware of this until she called to complain. Erica notes, “if it had been a classroom full of White kids from [Leonard] parents would have been up in arms. [Because they were not White] these kids get passed on, and on...”

Leonard school district works hard to prepare their students for this advanced coursework knowing that their parent population often requires this advanced track for their children. Again, this is an example of an institution responding to the needs of the dominant social class (Horvat, 20013; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Lin, 1999; McDonough, et.al., 2000). I learned from multiple participants that within WTHS the advanced courses take place in their own wing. This physical demarcation between students serves to deepen the divides between communities and offers a sort of symbolic violence that the general population must accept; advanced academic students deserve their own space to learn (Horvat, 2003). The results are not an integrated high school experience but rather a segregated microcosm of Leonard students going to small AP classes within the larger

population of Western Town students. In fact, Leonard mothers spoke often about their children having to deal with the chaos they would see in the lunchroom and the hallways. These hallway or lunchroom experiences were the types of diversity that Leonard mothers seemed willing to let their children explore. Frankie thought her daughter would find them interesting at first, and then they would exhaust her.

Only two mothers interviewed for this study allowed for their children to attend WTHS in a non-advanced track, Hope and Erica and their interviews revealed passionate views on education and race relations. The majority of mothers I interviewed voiced reluctance to send their child to WTHS if they were in the general population academic courses. Even Rebecca, who was really wanted her daughter to attend WTHS said that had her daughter not been in the advanced track she would have had to really consider JHS. Rebecca rationalized that the behavior problems worsen in regular classes where “students don’t approach the classroom in a serious manner.” Amanda too had concerns about her daughter attending WTHS in the non-advanced track and that was a large reason she sent her to JHS. Amanda told me that had her daughter been in advanced classes she would have been in a separate wing of WTHS. That separation would have made it less terrifying for her daughter and she would have been more likely to attend school there. While other participants noted that they would only allow their children to attend WTHS if they were in advanced tracking, Hope and Erica did not share this sentiment.

**Racist language and stereotyping.**

*[WTHS] is not a healthy environment. I mean, it's interesting. There are kids who would walk into school...eating Cheetos and drinking orange water. I don't even know what they were drinking, I mean, the Doritos. It's so strange.-Frankie*

There is a narrative I often heard previous to this study and throughout my interviews that families in Leonard who avoid WTHS do so because of racial prejudices. The data supports more complexity behind the process of mother's decisions than simple bigotry in high school choice as there were multiple moments of mother's speaking eloquently about the complexity of race and offering perspectives of their own privileges. Still, it is important for me to document that collected data revealed many instances of racial stereotyping and bigoted remarks from my participants. Some participants were frank about racism being part of life in Leonard, others seemed unaware that their comments were racially jarring. Some even apologized after they saw their transcripts, like Kate, who had concerns about appearing racist when she read about her daughter's experiences in WTHS. The data clearly shows that racism and stereotyping are part of the banal everyday conversations of many of the women I interviewed and that this talk has serious ramifications. These ramifications include the fact that that racism must play a part in the way high school decisions are made, whether it is acknowledged or not.

It is important to document that discussing these remarks are not to catch my participants in the act of racism. Through the process of my reflective journaling I have learned I am not cleaved from my participants (Peshkin, 1988). Rather, I recount these conversations because that is what this research aimed to do; shine a light on the ways that structures like race influence our educational opportunities (Horvat, 2003). The

existence of these remarks in my interviews concur with Bourdieu's ideas regarding indirect exclusion, the most powerful form of human dominance (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). In defining their White culture as more normal, less strange, less violent, better behaved, and less prone to poor academic standings, the mothers of Leonard have separated themselves from the Black community of Western Town and asserted superiority over less dominant groups (Horvat, 2003; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). A sense of otherness has been created and otherness is strange and meant to be avoided. In Bourdiean terms this could be viewed under the terms of both indirect exclusion and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1985). These mothers asserted their dominance through separation and exclusion but do not necessarily view it this way, it just is the way things happen to be. Certainly, mothers are also passing along this cultural knowledge to their own children who are entering WTHS or even attending JHS (Lareau, 2011). Randy acknowledges this when she shares that her daughter will likely, "stay away from the masses..." and stick to a "core group of friends." Frankie too echoed these sentiments when she shared her belief that her daughter could get caught up with the student body at JHS but that there was no chance of her integrating with any of the students from WTHS. These ramifications will be felt for generations.

**Diversity consumption.**

*"At [WTHS] they'll just sort of be in their small little microcosm, kind of going in fear from class to class and then graduating and going to Princeton."-Evelyn*

Within the conversation regarding diversity is the more specific idea of diversity consumption or the idea that White Middle class families chose diverse environments for the direct benefit of their own children and not the benefit of society as a whole

(Kimelberg & Billingham, 2013). This idea that those in power can use diversity to their own advantage is seen throughout the interviews of participating Leonard mothers as they consider the implications of diversity at WTHS and the ways that it may benefit their own child. Once Leonard mothers have successfully separated, or excluded themselves from the general population of WTHS (Lamont & Lareau, 1988), they can reconstruct the ways that WTHS works for their needs and the needs of their children. These benefits mainly center on the belief that WTHS provides an easier pathway to highly selective colleges due to less academic competition, as well as students gaining an advantage because they attend an urban characteristic school rather than the typical White middle class school of their peers (Fiel, 2013/15).

Of note is the conversation I had with Hope regarding the pathway to these elite universities Hope was dedicated to sending her children both an elite college and a diverse high school. However, she was unaware of her own role in diversity consumption. In fact, it seemed in our interview that she never noticed that the students earning the top honors and degrees in WTHS were mainly White. As she told her story about her family spent the last decade charting where top graduates of WTHS attended college I pointed this out. Hope took a moment, startled and seemingly deflated. Then she said, “You bring up a good point...if all the top graduates are all White what's the point?, ” perfectly illustrating the way that the dominant class remains unaware of the ways structures are supporting their advancement.

**White identity development.** In order to contextualize the ways that the mothers in Leonard understood their own Whiteness, its relationship to diversity, and their high school choices it is important to examine the development of what White identity means. Janet Helms was a pioneer in considering White racial identity development and how this development shaped

White people's understanding of their privilege (Helms, 1997; McIntosh, 1989). The literature on White Identity development has evolved over time and the recent work, *White Fragility* offers a new lens to examine the role of Whiteness in American race relations (DiAngelo, 2018). *White Fragility*, as defined by DiAngelo, is the inability of Whites to confront their own racial identity and thus continue their role in propagating racism in this country (2018). Instead of wanting to talk about what Whiteness has meant in this country, Whites mainly have the ability to ignore their race (DiAngelo, 2018). They can do so because our society has always empowered Whites and even today continually supports their dominance through a culture that legitimizes and thus, erases Whiteness (DiAngelo, 2018). Whites therefore, do not have to be confronted with their race, they can move about this country in a de-racialized state, something a person of color cannot and does not do (DiAngelo, 2018). Yet, when confronted with what their Whiteness has meant to persons of color in this country, Whites will mostly resort to anger, defensiveness or denial to combat conversations regarding race relations in this country (DiAngelo, 2018). DiAngelo (2018) makes the connection between Bourdieu's habitus and the existence of *White Fragility*. Since Whites mostly segregate themselves from people of color their habitus does not include comfortable exchanges with Black and Brown people, thus resulting in the internal discomfort, or fragility, when Whiteness is challenged (DiAngelo, 2018). *White Fragility* clearly has evolved from Helm's original work, which included a *White Racial Identity Model* (Helms, 1997). This model has five stages. The first stage is called contact, and in this stage race is invisible to White people (Helms, 1997). DiAngelo discusses this stage as the norm for most whites as most whites choose to live in segregated communities (DiAngelo, 2018). Living in these White-only worlds means that those participating in these worlds are socialized to see these worlds as good (DiAngelo, 2018). These good communities are marked by the absence of people of color, speaking volumes to children about what is good and what is meant to be avoided (DiAngelo, 2016). This stage speaks to Bourdieu's ideas about symbolic power as many White people of

today assume that communities just happen to be segregated (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996; DiAngelo, 2018; Helms, 1997).

The women in Leonard mainly exist in Helm's contact phase in particular because they have all chosen to live in an all White community coined, "little bubble". These women do not need to confront their Whiteness because they live in segregated communities where Whiteness is the universal (DiAngelo, 2018). Many of these women choose to stay in a White space and keep their children in such a space when they choose Jewel High School. While some of the women sending their children to JHS say that they hope their children will encounter diversity there, the reality is there will be minimal contact with other races or ethnicities, and minimal opportunities for meaningful interactions with persons of color. While some of the women mentioned the lack of exposure to other races as an issue within the Leonard community and cause of trouble for Leonard children attending WTHS there seemed to be minimal action taken to counteract this. With the exception of Hope who consciously brought her children around her students of color and Rebecca who chose an athletic program that was multi-racial, most of the women I interviewed discussed the lack of diversity in their lives but offered no plan for change.

Helms' second stage, disintegration, happens when something from the world forces the White individual to confront race as a reality, and acknowledge their own White identity (Helms, 1997). To DiAngelo (2018), this can be viewed when the White person begins to understand that they too are racialized. White people in this country are allowed the luxury of ignoring race, and they often want others to remain color blind too (DiAngelo, 2018, Helms, 1997). However, persons of color in this country never forget their race, as they are highly racialized (DiAngelo, 2018). White people in this country have the luxury of not having to be concerned about being the only White person in the room. When this dynamic shifts we often see great discomfort occur (DiAngelo, 2018; Helms, 1997). Helms posited that disintegration could lead to positive steps or a shutdown that is worse than the first stage, contact. This shutdown can lead to reactive racism and bigotry not seen in the contact phase when race is ignored (Helms, 1997).

Mothers in Leonard are forced to confront their own Whiteness when they have to make a high school choice. At this pivotal moment they must knowingly choose between continuing in an all White world or racializing their child by placing them into a school where they will be a minority. Parker never mentioned race in her decision-making this but that felt disingenuous, as all of the other mother's mentioned their Whiteness in relation to their school choice. Their experiences in confronting their Whiteness had mixed results. Erica felt guilt and shame about her own White identity when felt compelled to tell me something that could "be misconstrued....,the only reason my daughter's math class was without a teacher was because the students were Black." She elaborated that the only reason a math teacher was put in the classroom was because she, a White mother from Leonard, called the school, another example of the institution responding to the dominant class (Lareau, 2011). Erica shared that, " had it been a classroom of White students this never would have happened" and that it is the "system that passes these [Black] kids on". Guilt and shame are a common reaction in the disintegration phase (Helms, 1997). Erica took ownership of the privilege her Whiteness afforded her and shared an awareness of the lessor ways that Black and Brown students are treated at WTHS.

Kate's experience provides another view of the disintegration phase. Kate sent her eldest daughter to WTHS in an attempt to give her an urban school experience. She felt this would complement her daughter's social needs and professional future. Yet, when confronted with her Whiteness at WTHS, Kate's daughter shut down. Kate told me that her daughter's prejudices grew at WTHS due to a complete lack of exposure to Black and Brown students before high school. In high school, Kate's daughter reacted by retreating, illuminating DiAngelo's point about racial discomfort (DiAngelo, 2018). Kate's daughter was used to being in White spaces. When she was in spaces dominated by Black and Brown students she felt confused and uncomfortable. DiAngelo (2018) describes this discomfort as leaving the White world behind. Sadly, Kate's daughter never moved through to the fourth phase, Helm's pseudo-independence, and a space where Whites are both aware of their privilege and do not feel entitled to it. Rather, she stayed in



Helm's third phase, reintegration, where her prejudices were hardened and she felt entitled to her White privileges due to the misconduct and behaviors of the Black students (DiAngelo, 2018; Helms, 1997).

Frankie and Randy, both graduates of WTHS, can also be viewed as stuck in the reintegration stage. Randy spent considerable time in her interview discussing her experiences with her friends at WTHS versus the experiences of the "general population" of WTHS. Randy described feeling safe in the school because of its metal detectors but she did not feel safe alone in the bathroom. She taught her daughter to never go to the bathroom alone in WTHS, and other "life skills" she felt her daughter needed to attend WTHS. This discrepancy, where Randy's fear of guns is assuaged by metal detectors, but she is afraid of being in the bathroom alone with Black female students speaks to DiAngelo's (2018) assessment of racial comfort and the default Whites use in saying they do not feel safe when in fact it is discomfort they are feeling. They feel uncomfortable in another culture that is not White dominant and thus, misunderstood through their own narrow, White scope (DiAngelo, 2018). Furthermore, this unsafe feeling makes light of the history of violence Whites have had on Black and Brown bodies in this country and flips the realities of domination (DiAngelo, 2018). Frankie, too, spends ample time discussing her troubles with the "strange culture" of Western Town students. She mocks the dietary choices of these students and is angered by their jaywalking, or as she sees it, "a culture...who has not regard for the system." Frankie, forced to confront her own Whiteness at WTHS became unwilling and hardened by what she experienced (DiAngelo, 2018; Helms, 1997). And, rather than being able to identify with and live in the space of her own Whiteness and role in racialization, she prefers to mock, deride, and avoid the Black culture in Western Town unless she is consuming it for an elite university. DiAngelo's (2018) connects these intense reactive experiences to the habitus of a White person who has remained separated from any meaningful context with persons of color for most of their lives. White students from Leonard have lived segregated lives. Their habitus have

been shaped by this experience and furthermore, they have no personal context to understand and appreciate the cultural capital of students from Western Town.

Helm's fifth stage, Immersion/emersion, is when a White person has made a genuine effort to see their own race and the privileges membership has afforded them (Helms, 1997). I believe Hope, Rebecca, and myself can be viewed as living in this space. Hope was aware of her White at a young age because she in a racist household where she was not expected to play with children of color. Hope reacted against these teachings and chose a career with the intention of carrying out social justice. Rebecca's awareness of her Whiteness grew when she attended college and had meaningful interactions with students of color that shaped her future thinking. And I became aware of race, and my own Whiteness in middle school when I began attending a racially diverse school, formed meaningful friendships with students of color, and became interested in social equality. Both Hope and myself have dedicated professional energies towards acts of social justice, which could mean that through Helm's lens (1997) we have reached a final stage of accepting our White identity and actively looking to correct social injustice, but I hesitate to grant us this title as Hope and I are still very much benefitting from the system of privilege. And in Hope's case she was seemingly unaware that she was explicitly seeking out to consume elite schools in an apartheid school with a strong segregated tracking program.

### **Gender.**

*"I think my son needed the positive role models...you know, cause he's a boy...he's listening to rap...At [JHS] he'll see less of the kids getting in serious trouble."-Kate*

The role that gender played in the high school choices of Leonard mothers was unanticipated but had a prominent place in several of the participant's decisions. Many Leonard mothers considered gender in relationship to the diverse nature of WTHS. They had to decide whether or not their children could handle the culture at WTHS, which is

predominantly low SES and students of color. Mothers with both genders of children saw their daughters as more capable of navigating the hallways and culture of Western Town High School. Daughters were viewed as more “level-headed” while sons were often described as “immature and silly,” and prone to, “do the dumbest stuff.” They could get into more trouble. This trouble took two forms. The first type of trouble was the possibility that their sons could make connections, or friendships, with the boys from Western Town through areas such as music and sports. These connections could lead to social interactions with the boys from Western Town outside of school and could get the White Leonard boys into real trouble. Kate in particular was worried that her son’s preference for rap music could translate to his getting into trouble. She was adamant that he attend JHS so that he have the, “correct role models.” The second type of trouble that concerned Leonard mothers was that their sons would be physically victimized by the boys from Western Town . Mothers described their sons as, “innocent, naive, and too small” to take on these challenges. Amelia felt her son would, “get toppled over [in the hallways]”, and Amanda saw her sons as “[being] afraid and really shriveling up [in WTHS].” Underlying the concerns that Leonard mothers have for their sons are long held belief systems that Black boys are more dangerous, prone to cause trouble, and less innocent than their White counterparts (Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, Ditomasso, (2014); Monroe, (n.d.)).

Mothers of daughters more often considered the social opportunities for their girls in their high school choices. Many mothers talked about the difficulty of being a girl in the small town of Leonard. Amanda shared, “[Leonard] is a terrible place for girls.” Since JHS is a school that is similarly insular and cliquy like Leonard some mothers expressed

concern about their daughter's social experiences there. Sons overall fared better socially in the small town of Leonard and they were thought to be able to do well in the similar culture of JHS. In contrast WTHS was often invoked as a place, which could broaden a daughter's experiences. Kate described it as an entry in, "city-living" as she originally believed WTHS would provide her daughter with the feeling of what living in an urban environment would be like. Frankie saw WTHS as a school where her independent daughter could, "carve her own path." Even girls who were socially successful in Leonard were seen as needing to break out of the mold, like Rebecca who very much wants her daughter to separate from the best friend she's always had. This desire for daughter's to spread their wings was not seen in the mothers of sons that I interviewed except from Hope.

### **The Consequences of Choice**

Adjacent to the factor's mothers were considering while making high school choices were the emotional tolls that school choice extracted on families, and the community of Leonard as a whole. As Rebecca shared, "I like that we've evolved to where you can have choices, but I do think there's consequences for these choices." Underscoring the consequences of choice is the Bourdieuan framework of privilege. While the experience of making school choices can be difficult for a family or a community, having choice is always done from a position of power and privilege. These next sections will both illustrate the emotional experiences of the mothers making choices, and examine the ways privilege intersects with these choices.

**Consequences in the Leonard community.** Many of the participants lamented that the stress of having to choose a high school caused tension for their family and for

their small town. Only one participant did not seem to experience this stress, Parker. The other participants felt stress because they hoped they were choosing correctly for their child. Some mothers expressed unsettling feelings when friends and neighbors who wanted to get into JHS were not accepted into that school. More than one participant felt that the stress of choice was creating discord in the town and causing a “feeding frenzy” amongst parents who now felt the need to compete for placement either in JHS or the advanced tracks of WTHS, highlighting the theoretical proposition that families in higher social classes compete to place their children in advantageous school options (Crozier et al, 2008; Demerath, Lynch, Williams, Peters & Davidson, 2010; Fiel, 2015; Reay & Lucey, 2003; Reay, 2005). Sometimes the constant chatter of high school choice amongst neighbors also caused individual mothers to disconnect from their peer groups and the social networks that had previously supported their emotional needs became a source of competition, comparison, and possible shame if children were not accepted in the school of their choice. As their children got closer to the time when decisions had to be made, a form of indirect exclusion or hierarchy within the community of Leonard could be felt, as students plucked for JHS felt that they got a coveted spot leaving others feeling jealous, anxious, and scrambling for a Plan B (Horvat, 2003; Lamont & Lareau, 2011).

Furthermore, many interviewees expressed dismay that JHS was allowed to come into Leonard and choose their best students, or “skim the cream”, as Erica shared. Kate said, “I don’t know how they get away with it.” Yet, JHS does just that and it is tacitly accepted by both Leonard parents and the Leonard school district. After all, Leonard students are the largest beneficiaries of the choice program and the Leonard school

district benefits financially when its students go to JHS. These looming benefits seem to keep change at bay.

**Consequences of attending JHS.** Of note were the comments of several participants who mentioned the experience that Leonard students have had of entering into the Jewel community has proven difficult due to the insular nature of Jewel. As previously mentioned, Jewel's community is similar to Leonard, but it is even smaller. Some participants, like Frankie and Kate, pointed out anti-Semitism in the Jewel community is one reason why they had concerns sending their child to JHS. Amanda mentioned the "insider's club" in Jewel that kept all others on the outside. However, she was more willing to have her children deal with exclusion at JHS than "being terrified" at WTHS.

**Consequences for WTHS.** Dani McClain writes that mothering is always a political act for African American mothers, and the act of choosing a school for one's child is a political act (McClain, 2019). In a sense the same is true for White mothers. White middle class mothers most often get to choose, and they most often chose to uphold the status quo. We see this to be the case in Leonard City, which in the last decade of school choice has seen its students and resources move from WTHS over to JHS. White mothers could choose to integrate, but they do not. They could choose to focus their resources on benefitting all children at WTHS, but they do not (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009). Thus, again illustrating that school choice most often hurts students of color (Kimelberg & Billingham). As DeSena (2009) wrote White middle class mothers may spout progressive, political beliefs but not practice them. Ultimately, mothers in this study made the political choice to best serve their own children.

Finally, in reviewing the various consequences associated with the Jewel school choice programming one can begin to see Bourdieu's idea of symbolic power inherent in this system (Bourdieu). The choice system at JHS is legitimized by the state and participating school districts, justifying its criterion which only accepts students with certain test scores. And while those within these communities often acknowledge the problems with the system they just as often express that at least it provides choice, noting a discontent with but acceptance of how things just happen to be.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations marked this study. The solicitation of participants was limited to snowball or chain sampling. While this form of sampling is justified and research based (Patton, 1990; Rubin & Rubin, 2012), it would have been better to have solicited my participants in the way I first intended, through a school-wide solicitation (see Appendix A). This method was declined by the current school superintendent who did not grant me permission to solicit 8th grade parents through a school approved flyer. He feared that it could insult some of the mothers in the grade. When this project first started I was granted permission from the then superintendent to pursue my study in the school. The change in superintendents meant that I ended up having to procure participants through a known source. This method proved successful because I was able to procure both women I did not know, and the needed number of interviews required in my methodology. Still, I would have liked the original method better as I would have had the ability to ask the entire 8th grade community if they would like to participate rather than a few.

Personal limitations of this study included my own status as a new researcher. A second limitation of this study was my lack of manpower. The act of research is solitary. Although I have the insights of other research pieces I would have benefited from the synergistic energy that comes from working with other people. Another final limitation of this study is my race. I am a White middle class mother of privilege and my own habitus is shaped by that. In turn, it shapes the study (Peshkin, 1988). It limits my thinking, which is why having other researchers to work with could have stretched this study into other directions.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Findings from the data showed that gender was a factor which weighed heavily in many mother's minds when choosing a high school for their child. Mothers, in particular, had trouble placing their White sons into an apartheid school. Future research could look more deeply into this finding. I have not come across research that parses apart the effects of gender on the school choice process or why White sons are considered differently in their interactions with students of color.

Another area of future research could be to document the experience of the Leonard students as they move through high school and beyond. This ethnographic study could help researchers better understand the chasms between parental expectations and actual experiences. It would be interesting to note the professions that students attending WTHS versus JHS pursued. Was cultural reproduction completed? Did those with mothers who had dreams of their children going to WTHS and attending elite colleges see those dreams actualized? Did children who attended WTHS leave the area of Leonard and did those attending JHS tend to stay? Or, was there no correlation between the



expectations of the mothers, their high school choices, and the adult lives their children decided to pursue?

### **Implications for Leadership**

The collected data shows two areas where leadership in Leonard can act to make improvements for both the Leonard, Walden, and Western Town school communities. The first is to address the lack of exposure that Leonard, Walden, and Western Town students have before high school. This lack of exposure is often a dissuading factor for Leonard parents considering WTHS and the result is a loss of White middle class resources for WTHS to utilize. Furthermore, from a moral standpoint, isolation serves to deepen community divides, which never results in anything good. The second item that school leadership should actively work towards is consolidating school districts with Walden City. Those who support consolidation realize it would require extensive planning. However, the results would relieve Leonard of the financial stress of supporting a school district with a shrinking population. Additionally, since Walden is an extremely diverse district, consolidation would have the added benefit of addressing the first goal, providing diverse experiences to Leonard students in their younger years.

The collected data has shown that the Leonard school board is resisting consolidation even when part-time residents, the state Leonard resides in, and out of state residents have vocalized support for this idea (Local news source, October, 2018). Yet, these supporters are outsiders and it is very difficult for an outsider to create lasting change without the community recognizing their legitimacy (Ellsworth, 2000). This legitimacy assigned to the insider/outsider role speaks Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power. Agents, in this case agents of change, do not have power unless they are

legitimized by those they seek power from (Bourdieu, 1985). The sort of radical change I am suggesting Leonard needs is possible, but it is messy and difficult (Fullan 2001/2007; Evans, 2009). Often, radical change is guided by a moral directive that both the community and leadership agree on (Demers, 2009; Fullan 2001/2010; Evans, 1996). This sort of change swells from the ground up and creates the lasting, double looped change that becomes part of the culture (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Ellsworth, 2000; Evans, 1996; Osterman & Kottkamp). It is the type of change one wants.

In order for this change to occur in Leonard, the district would have to believe it should change, and plan for change. Currently the local population is pleased with the oft-termed “private school” education their children are receiving (Local news, Oct, 2018), and the school board has dismissed efforts to seriously consider consolidation (Board of Education minutes 2015/ 2016). While outsiders such as second home owner like the idea of consolidations, few insiders have voiced support (local news source, October, 2018). However, in my interviews Evelyn shared that she was intrigued by the idea and thought it was inevitable due to shrinking populations. Still, she was cautious about how to plan for this eventual change and reflective about the Leonard mindset adapting to this change. Based on these variables Evelyn guessed that consolidation would not occur for another decade. Furthermore, the existence of school choice in Jewel complicates the matter since it allows Leonard to maintain its school budget and therefore its independent district. A stable budget diminishes the need to consolidate. As long as the Leonard school district is financially stable and Leonard families are benefitting from the school choice program, there seems to be little impetus to change.

When I started my leadership program in 2012 I wrote a leadership platform that defined my most important core value as equity. I deeply believed that schools must be places of possibility as schools are a nation's opportunity to develop our next generation. Upon reflection of my years of coursework, and this doctoral study, it is clear to me that I never wavered from my initial desire to study how to make schools and learning more equitable. I have examined this idea of equity from different angles. Sometimes I examined it from a student perspective such as when I became and remain impassioned about progressive and alternative educational models. Other times my experiences as a teacher led me to explore teacher development practices, and their relationships to inclusive curriculums. Ultimately, I observed the inequities embedded in my local town's experience with school choice and became determined to study it. I wanted to know why mothers made their school choices and how much was based upon race and social class. From this study I learned that our educational options and choices are intertwined with these factors (Bourdieu, 1985, 1989; 1996; Bourdieu & Passaron, 1990; Lareau, 2011), and that school choice programming can and should include parameters around demographics.

In terms of my own leadership I have seen it evolve over the years from someone who was unafraid to be radical to a person who has less confidence. I ascribe this change to moving to a conservative town, Leonard, and my experiences with racism and its supporting structures there. Leonard made me feel less powerful and less capable of making change since I began to understand that most residents were pleased with the status quo. They did not welcome change and this was evident in every board meeting I attended where change was broached. What I did come to understand and reconsider was

where I did have power and that currently my small sphere of influence is how I raise my own children (Tatum, 2018). I wanted them to have diverse experiences and grow up in an inclusive environment. So, I made leadership decision and created change in my familial community by moving out of Leonard. I see this decision as leaving lasting cultural changes for my children and thus, our future. Also, writing this specific dissertation has both changed and crystallized my thinking regarding privilege, power, and education. Thus, my future professional scholarship goals will evolve from this dissertation and seek out ways to write about and study privilege, or the lack of it, in educational arenas.

### **Implications for Policy**

The data confirms what the literature has already shown, school choice most often benefits those with more social and political clout, the White middle class (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Reay & Lucey, 2003; Reinoso, 2008; Wells, 2014). The results are often highly segregated schools (Kozol, 2005; Orfield et al., 2014). In the case of JHS and WTHS, Leonard residents are able to have their high school needs met without having to move or invest resources into neighboring Western Town (Kimmelberg & Billingham, 2012; Renzulli & Evans, 2005.) And, the results show that over the last decade up to half of Leonard's graduating eighth class attends JHS. This defeats the purpose and intention of school choice, which was meant to offer better opportunities to those in failing schools (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Road & Wells, 2013). Thus, there is a need for the state to take an interest in the demographics of the school choice program in Jewel. There is a new precedent for mandating choice policy to reflect the demographics of an area. Last year New York City pioneered a new policy mandating

specific guidelines that choice schools had to follow. These intentions of these guidelines was to fully integrate premier choice schools by insisting they admit students who reflect the demographics of their neighborhoods (Veigna, 2019). Early results show this change that these new selection criteria were working (Veigna, 2019). As we saw in the literature, when government requires explicit integration policy, we see integration increase in schools (Chemerinsky, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield et al., 2014). The state in which Jewel High School resides funds the choice students and thus, should be involved in setting policy to ensure racial diversity in its choice students.

### **Reflections and Conclusion**

I began this research study over two years ago but it really started over a decade ago when I moved to the small town of Leonard. One event that continues to resonate with me was the story I was told by a fellow White middle class mother as we both watched our children play street hockey in a town neighboring Leonard where families frequently socialize and intermingle. I commented on the wonderful program and she asked me if I wanted to know how it started. The street hockey arena used to be basketball courts. However, these basketball courts attracted, according to the mother, too many kids from The Village, an area of low income homes mainly populated by African Americans and Latinos located nearby. It was illegal to prevent people from playing on a town's public courts so the town came up with a solution; destroy the basketball courts and make a street hockey rink. Street hockey would deter the children from the Village from using the facility. A series of public meetings and a town vote solidified this strategy.

The mother who shared this story with me was very pleased with the results. On the other hand, I was shocked. Although I was aware of racism and had studied it throughout my education, I had not really encountered it in my social circles. That night in bed I cried because I was so angry. I was angry this happened, I was angry to be a part of this town, and I was troubled that I was, although unknowingly, participating in a sports program whose inception was rooted in exclusion and racism (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). I was further troubled that this woman uninhibitedly shared her story with me. She assumed that my White race meant I was in collusion with her. I did not support this decision and it made me feel distanced from the community where I had set up a home. Furthermore, while I am White, I am also Jewish and these identities have offered me different perspectives. While I am seen as White on the outside, on the inside I relate to my people's history of persecution. This Jewish history compels me advocate for others.

I was also becoming part of the school community in Leonard and became privy to the conversations neighbors had about WTHS and high school choices in the area. Like the story of the street hockey rink, these private conversations ranged from overtly racist to those filled with racial undertones. In public, at school meetings, the topic of high school was being discussed too. I witnessed ideas about bridging the Leonard and Western Town communities be quickly dismissed. Instead I saw time devoted to explaining to parents how to get their child into JHS. I saw high school literature fairs that excluded WTHS, and I became increasingly frustrated with what I originally thought was a unique problem in Leonard. Leonard was abandoning its distressed district school for a far Whiter option. I was determined to write about this unique problem and call the school district and citizens of Leonard to task on their behavior.

What I found though, was a bitter pill to swallow. First, I learned that Leonard was not unique. In fact it was well-documented that school choice never inspired the organic integration it set out to (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Tatum, 2018). Rather, it became a springboard for families with means to use for their own children's advantage (Fiel, 2015; Roda & Wells, 2013). This felt like a blow. All over the nation families of means were using school choice to their own advantage. Still, I became energized when I learned that New York City started to take explicit measures to insist on balanced demographics in their school choice program. There seems to be a glimpse of hope that these progressive statues can make their way to Leonard.

I think the greatest leap I have made in my thinking during the course of this project is to stop blaming the citizens of Leonard (or really anyone) for their behavior during the school choice process. This change in thinking occurred over time and started when I encountered Lareau (2011), who in turn introduced me to Bourdieu's theories concerning social reproduction (Horvat, 2003; Horvat, Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). These ideas provided me with a framework on which to understand human behaviors. Understanding meant that I was less judgmental against the citizens of Leonard. Alongside these new understandings came reflection about my own choices for my children that aligned with what my participating mothers did. I made the best choices for my children's needs and I made these choices using all of my resources. I was no better or worse than my participants, in fact, I was right in line with them. Initially in this research I thought of myself as the researcher starting out to study the bad behavior of Leonard. But through this process I have seen that people, myself included, act in their own best interests. I am not sure what to do with this finding. Certainly, I

believe there is room for education policy that mandates integration. But, I am also reticent about too much government intervention into individual choices. And that leaves me to ponder the individual. What I think I know now is to start with myself and my own choices. How will I impact race relations and my own relationship to White privilege? Where will I next direct my professional energies? Reading Beverly Tatum (2018) offers ways forward. It encourages us to not hide from painful discourse and to engage in open and structured dialogue (Tatum, 2018). I do believe that the efforts of this research piece can be categorized in that way. It is an attempt to not hide, to be honest about what has happened in Leonard. And it has shined a light for me to begin to investigate my own relationship between the choices I make and the values I espouse.



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## Appendix A

### Participant Solicitation

Dear Families of Eighth Grade Students

I am conducting a Rowan University approved research study about high school choice. As parents of 8th graders you are in a position to provide valuable feedback about this experience and add to the growing research seeking to understand how parents make school choices.

My research is focused on the experiences of mothers of eighth grade students who have attended or graduated from college. Participation in the study included one in person interview, which takes approximately one hour, and a possible follow up phone call or meeting. Interviews are scheduled at a place and time of your convenience. While there is no monetary compensation I will provide snacks and beverages during the interview.

It is my hope that this subject matter peaks your interest. Capturing the experience of high school choice through the stories of a community's mothers will prove valuable amongst the growing body of research concerned with school choice.

Please reach out to me via email or phone if you would consider participating:  
[jilltabachnick@gmail.com](mailto:jilltabachnick@gmail.com) or 917-837-4979.

Best,  
Jill Tabachnick Levi

**Appendix B**  
**Interview Protocol**

Participant's "Name":

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Purpose of Study: To understand the many ways White middle class mothers of 8th grade students experience high school choice.

*Interview Questions:*

1. Where did you grow up? Describe your childhood and early school experiences.
  
2. Where did you attend high school? Describe your high school experience?
  - How do you experiences affect the choice you are currently making?
  
3. Describe your experience with the school system here.
  
4. Describe your child who is currently applying for a high school.
  - What does he/she most like to do?
  
5. What are your priorities for your child's high school experience? Does your child share these priorities?



6. What high schools would you most like your child to attend? What are your reasons for this choice?

- What do you hope your child will accomplish in this high school?
- What are your concerns about this high school?

7. What has been the impact of school choice on this community?

8. What larger ramifications, if any, exist from school choice being introduced into the community? (Creswell, 2007)

- The school community of Leonard
- The larger community of Western Town-and Leonard

Thank you for your participation in this interview. As promised, all responses and potential future interviews will be kept confidential.

## Appendix C

### Participants Agreement

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. Participation in this study is voluntary. The information being provided is for you to understand the purpose of the study and your rights as a participant. Please be aware that you can withdraw from this study at any time without damaging your relationship with the researcher, the local school system, or Rowan University.

The purpose of this study is to understand the ways that White middle class mothers of 8th grade students experience high school choice. Data will be collected in the form of interviews from all participants. Interviews are approximately one hour in length with the possibility of a follow up interview or phone call at the participant's agreement. Other data collection includes field notes written by the research student, journal reflections written by the research student, and document analysis of pertinent news articles

Participants are welcome to ask questions about the study at any point in time. I am happy to share the findings of this study after the research is completed. The confidentiality of all participants will remain in place throughout all phases of this study through publication and the participant's identity will only be known by the researcher. There are no known risks associated with this study and the benefits of participation include adding to the qualitative research associated with school choice and communities.

Please sign this consent form to show that you understand the parameters of your participation and the purposes of this study. Please keep a copy of this consent form for your records.

Date

Signature of Participant:

Signature of Researcher:

(Creswell, 2007)

## **Appendix D**

### **Follow Up Interview Questions**

1. Can you describe any changes you made to your child's schedule or activities related to their high school choices?
2. How, if it did, did the gender of your child shape your high school choice?
3. Please describe how your views of the day to day life of your child in high school shaped your choice process? How did these views shape your high school choice?

## Appendix E

### High School Choices of Leonard Students 2016-2018

**In 2016, Leonard 8th grade graduates (59 total) chose the following schools for high school:**

19 - WTHS

21 -JHS

7 - Vocational Charter School

3 - Local Catholic School

1 - Private School

3 - Charter High School focused on the Arts

2 -Area high school taking in tuition students. Parameters frequently change and Leonard students are not likely to get in

3 - moved out of the area

**In 2017, Leonard 8th graders selected (41 total):**

17 - WTHS

17 - JHS

2 - Vocational Charter

2 - Area high school tuition student

3 - moved

no one went to Catholic or Private

**In 2018, Leonard 8th graders selected (41 total)**

14- WTHS

12-JHS

7-Local Catholic School

5-Area high school tuition student

1-Private School

1-Charter High School focused on Vocational Skills

1-moved out of the area