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Exploring Single Black Mothers' Resistance Through Homeschooling

Cheryl Fields-Smith

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To my Heavenly Father, who supplies all my needs (Phil. 4:19), lifts my head (Psalms 3:3), and makes all things possible (Matt 19:26).

To my West African ancestors who endured and survived the horror of slavery; I am because you are.

To my earthly mother and father, the late Howard and Doris Fields, who provided wonderful models of faith and walking in the Light even through tough times. I miss you so much, but your lives, your faith in God, and our love for one another continue to inspire me.

To Steven and Cherranda Smith, my gifts from God who fill my life with the hope and joy necessary to keep pushing forward.

Preface

(Basis and personal motivation for this book)

Why would an educational research/teacher educator at a state university and former public school teacher whose children attended public schools decide to write a book on single Black mothers who homeschool? The abbreviated answer to this question emerged after an intellectually and emotionally challenging, but necessary journey. I persevered through the journey because of the people listed the Dedication and Acknowledgements sections of this text.

The journey began when while conducting a study aimed at replicating my dissertation on Black parental engagement someone referred me to a mother who homeschooled her children. Amazed to know that Black people homeschooled, I scheduled an interview, which ended up being four hours long. Intrigued, I searched for research on Black homeschooling, but only limited empirically-based items existed; nothing that focused solely on Black families. Still using theories and frameworks found in family engagement research, I received a Small Spencer Foundation Grant to pursue a line of inquiry focused on the motivations and practices of 46 Black home educators primarily representing the in the Metro-Atlanta area.

But, I soon realized that family engagement frameworks did not fully capture the motivation or practices of Black homeschool parents. Later the data would reveal that these particular Black parents' decisions to homeschool represented something much more significant than parental

involvement. But, first I had to learn to live with, and embrace, the political implications and controversy surrounding this research. Academically, it made sense to engage in research on Black homeschooling because no one else was doing so at the time. This was the much searched for "gap in the literature" and actually represented a launching of a new line of research. But, I needed to find my own personal connection to the work.

In this era of School Choice, homeschooling might be conceived as in opposition to public schooling, but for Black families this thinking is oversimplified. The "choice" to homeschool does not usually come easy for Black families. We cannot ignore historical context when examining any aspects of Black families' experiences in the U.S. Historically. In particular, schooling has not come easily to African Americans in the U.S. I detail this further in Chapter 1 of the book, but suffice it to say that some people, including many family members of Black home educators, view homeschooling among Black families as a slap in the face to the Brown v. Board of Education case, which desegregated public schools. The problem is 60 years later, schools have become resegregated and typically under resourced in predominantly Black communities. While many home educators love their communities and even hold public education in high regard, how long should they wait for the high-quality education they want for their children and that their children deserve?

In 2011, I was invited by a special panel interested in the diversity of school choice to give a talk at the annual American Educational Researchers Association (AERA meeting in New Orleans. I titled the talk, *Reclaiming and Redefining the Village: Homeschooling Among Black Families*. My conception of Black homeschooling had shifted from a parental engagement lens to a Black Feminist Theory (BFT) lens, but at that time, this was focused solely on bell hooks' notion of Homeplace. I related homeschooling among Black families now as a representation of a reprioritizing of Homeplace, which bell hooks described as what Black mothers did during the Jim Crow Era to empower and build up their children so that they could endure the racial prejudice and hate they would face beyond the safety of their home. Similarly, I believed Black parents' decisions to homeschool today could be conceived as a form of resistance destructive institutional and individual policies and practices their children either experienced, or parents thought they might experience in conventional schools. Black homeschooling today embodies a contemporary Homeplace. It was in New Orleans that I would meet a passionate, deep thinker in the form of the late, Dr. Monica Wells Kisura.

Monica had completed a dissertation focused on Black homeschooling in the Washington, D.C. area. But, Monica's dissertation viewed Black homeschooling from the sociopolitical context. I still have her initial email dated 4/10/2011 with the subject, Hello/Your Homeschooling Research. We spoke the day after she sent the email and we bonded over our similarities, but also our differences. We were each other's missing link in many ways. Monica had never taken a course on educational theory, but she pushed me to see the implications of Black homeschooling beyond Homeplace. Our conversations together, whether over the phone or in person, frequently became heated because of the clashing of our different perspectives. But the voices of our participants kept us united and we published, *Resisting the Status Quo*.[1] Working with Monica helped me to see the "big picture' of Black home education, but more importantly, it contributed to the formulation of my personal motivation for continuing to do this work. Overall, I have come to view homeschooling among Black families as a radical marker of Black families' self-agency and their refusal to except inferiority and mediocrity in our children's learning.

Pursuing a research agenda focused on Black home education has also been a personal journey. One which I believe has been wholly divinely orchestrated. From my doctoral experience to most recently, three trips to Ghana, West Africa, I have been inspired to share the voices of Black home educators. Additionally, my role as parent has influenced the writing of this particular book.

But, I am not just any parent, I am a single parent, which is why I have chosen to write my first book focused on the single parent families who comprised 15% (7 out of 46) of the original two-year study. Being a single parent can come with a great deal of shame, self-imposed or otherwise. People around you, even family, will sometimes view you from a deficit lens falsely thinking you either 'allowed' your marriage to fail or you 'whored' around and 'got yourself' pregnant without being married. These narrow-minded, polarizing, and extremist views contribute to our shame, or the shame I have felt as a single parent. They fail to consider that perhaps you did not choose to be a single parent. They also naively ignore the tremendous strength it takes to choose life over abortion or to not fall into the arms the first man that comes along just so you won't have

[1] Fields-Smith, C. & Wells Kisura, M. (2013). Resisting the status quo: The narratives of Black homeschoolers in Metro-Atlanta and Metro-DC. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 88(3), 265–283.

to carry the shame. Your life is forever altered and you do not always see the positives of these changes right away, particularly, if you never wanted to be a single parent. As a Christian, single parent(ness) rocked my beliefs because I knew God did not intend for me to raise my children alone and I questioned, why He allow my divorce to happen, which attempted to challenge my faith.

Reflexivity Statement

My roles as a parent and teacher educator positioned me as an indigenous-insider[2] for this study. My teacher educator and pro-public schooling stance may appear to position me an outsider to home educators, but my participants came to see me as an ally through the research process and frequently encouraged me with statements like, "Who else could tell our story?".

Like my participants, I am a divorced, Black mother. Somewhat analogous to their decision to homeschool, I chose to forgo full-time employment to pursue a doctoral degree full-time. As the primary caregiver for my children (ages 6 and 10 at the time) and working through the shame others tried to impose on me, I never lingered too long on what people thought I was 'supposed to do' as a single parent. Mourning the death of my marriage had turned into dreaming of new possibilities with my single-mother reality, and so, I found myself 1000+ miles away from home working on my doctorate. This leap of faith enabled me to empathize with the decisions made by the homeschoolers in this study.

Deciding to quit my job to return to school led people close to me to question my mothering because what single-parent would forgo household income in order to go back to school, especially when I had two degrees already? My faith gave me the strength to take a risk. It is on this common ground that the homeschoolers and I built a strong connection, which facilitated the research process.

Fully believing we all have free will to express our beliefs surrounding religion/spirituality or not all, the reader should understand that faith, spirituality and religion expressed through a Black, Baptist, Christian perspective permeated the context of the participating mothers' lives.

[2] See Banks, J. (1998). The lives and values of researchers: Implications for educating citizens in a multicultural society. *Educational Researcher*, 27(7), 4–17.

Given the deep historical connections of religion/spirituality among people throughout the African diaspora and particularly in U.S. context where the Black church served as the epicenter of the Civil Rights Movement, these expressions of religion/spiritually/faith should be expected. Indeed, the influence of faith/religion/spirituality became so inextricably integrated within the narratives that to remove them would render Black home educators' stories as sterile and incomplete.

The home educators and I held common ground on our collective Blackness, gender, and motherhood. However, we also pushed each other, as iron sharpens iron.[3] At times, home educators referred to parents in the schools as too complacent, for example. Would they have considered me a complacent parent? In my mind, I did all I could do to ensure my children had the best educational experiences. Working with these women enabled me to question definitions of engagement, sacrifice, and commitment toward the raising of Black children. These questions enhanced my intentionality/connection within the study. Over time, I found, we did not necessarily share similar beliefs, but my participants and I had a spiritual connection, which heightened my need to depict their stories accurately.

Through my lens as a teacher educator and proponent of public education, I viewed Black homeschool parents as an untapped resource toward understanding what works in education of Black children. This stance enabled me to fully listen to the voices of single, Black home educators and for them to entrust me with their stories.

Purpose

Though research on Black homeschooling has increased, the experiences of single Black home educators have continued to be overlooked. Ignoring the experiences and voices of single parent homeschool families continues the false narrative that homeschooling is a two-parent, white, middle class phenomenon.

Therefore, this book provides a rarely acknowledged perspective of homeschooling; that is the experiences and voices of single, Black mothers, who homeschool, which offers a counter narrative to imagery of home educators as middle-class, stay-at-home mothers. On the contrary,

[3] Biblical reference, Proverbs 27:17.

at the time of the study these single moms were not fully employed and they lived on incomes below or close to the poverty line. One mom reported that she lived in a low-income housing community. Certainly, it would be much easier for a single mom to drop her children off at school so she could go to work to support her family. Why do these mothers decide to do what seems so impossible, forgoing income in order to serve as their children's primary educator? The answer relates to the factors represents our legacy of self-determination and agency in the pursuit of excellence in education. The mothers presented in this book are driven in large part by a sense of purpose that transcends conventional wisdom. As a result of reading this book, you should expect to see examples of the strength, resourcefulness, and amazing faith of single Black mothers. By highlighting the diversity that exist within the motivations and practices of the single Black mothers represented in this text, it is my hope that you will be inspired to work toward deeper understanding of single Black mothers' school choice decision-making, their engagement in their children's lives, and possibly further exploring their experiences with home education in your work as well.

Athens, USA Cheryl Fields-Smith

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The late Dr. Monica Wells Kisura, for graciously challenging me in thinking deeply in our collaboration for *Resisting the Status Quo*. I truly miss your voice.

The continuous prayers of Mr. Niles Philpot. (James 5:16).

Contents

List of Tables

CHAPTER 1

Voices Speaking Truths from Our Past and Our Present

Today, more than 60 years after the Brown vs BOE mandate, Black families increasingly choose to homeschool their children. Black students represent an estimated 8% of the estimated two million homeschooled students in the USA (McQuiggan & Megra, 2017). Moreover, Ray (2015) indicated that homeschooling has increased by 90% among Black families between the years 1999 and 2010. Given the varying reporting policies state to state, these numbers most likely represent underestimations; not all states report number of students homeschooled. But the trend toward increasing Black home education in USA signifies a growing departure from a cultural heritage of looking to traditional schooling for uplift and is worthy of further understanding.

The rise in homeschooling among Black families serves as a counternarrative to characterizations of Black parents' disinterest in their children's education. As Ford (2017) indicated, such negative stereotypes have been perpetuated for decades, in part, by the policies and practices that stemmed from the Moynihan Report. Black mothers in particular have faced undue scrutiny and characterization as 'absent' or from a deficit perspective. Continued privileging of White, middle-class norms surrounding appropriate family engagement (Cooper, 2009), and effective mothering (Lois, 2013) have promoted deviant perceptions of low-income and Black mothers' ways of being. For example, Cooper's (2007, 2009) work posited Black mothers' ways of engaging in their children's learning represented elements of caring through their fighting against and

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